Nicholas Nekrassov

Who Can be Happy and Free in Russia?

Ernest Greene

WHO CAN BE HAPPY AND FREE IN RUSSIA?

BY

NICHOLAS NEKRASSOV

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NICHOLAS ALEXEIEVITCH NEKRASSOV

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NEKRASSOV'S WHO CAN BE HAPPY AND FREE IN RUSSIA?

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NICHOLAS NEKRASSOV

A Sketch of his Life

Western Europe has only lately begun to explore the rich domain of Russian literature, and is not yet acquainted with all even of its greatest figures. Treasures of untold beauty and priceless value, which for many decades have been enlarging and elevating the Russian mind, still await discovery here. Who in England, for instance, has heard the names of Saltykov, Uspensky, or Nekrassov? Yet Saltykov is the greatest of Russian satirists; Uspensky the greatest story-writer of the lives of the Russian toiling masses; while Nekrassov, "the poet of the people's sorrow," whose muse "of grief and vengeance" has supremely dominated the minds of the Russian educated classes for the last half century, is the sole and rightful heir of his two great predecessors, Pushkin and Lermontov.

Russia is a country still largely mysterious to the denizen of Western Europe, and the Russian peasant, the *moujik*, an impenetrable riddle to him. Of all the great Russian writers not one has contributed more to the interpreta-

tion of the enigmatical soul of the *moujik* than Russia's great poet, Nekrassov, in his life-work the national epic, *Who can be Happy in Russia?*

There are few literate persons in Russia who do not know whole pages of this poem by heart. It will live as long as Russian literature exists; and its artistic value as an instrument for the depiction of Russian nature and the soul of the Russian people can be compared only with that of the great epics of Homer with regard to the legendary life of ancient Greece.

Nekrassov seemed destined to dwell from his birth amid such surroundings as are necessary for the creation of a great national poet.

Nicholas Alexeievitch Nekrassov was the descendant of a noble family, which in former years had been very wealthy, but subsequently had lost the greater part of its estates. His father was an officer in the army, and in the course of his peregrinations from one end of the country to the other in the fulfilment of his military duties he became acquainted with a young Polish girl, the daughter of a wealthy Polish aristocrat. She was seventeen, a type of rare Polish beauty, and the handsome, dashing Russian officer at once fell madly in love with her. The parents of the girl, however, were horrified at the notion of marrying their daughter to a "Muscovite savage," and her father threatened her with his curse if ever again she held communication with her lover. So the matter was secretly arranged

between the two, and during a ball which the young Polish beauty was attending she suddenly disappeared. Outside the house the lover waited with his sledge. They sped away, and were married at the first church they reached.

The bride, with her father's curse upon her, passed straight from her sheltered existence in her luxurious home to all the unsparing rigours of Russian camp-life. Bred in an atmosphere of maternal tenderness and Polish refinement she had now to share the life of her rough, uncultured Russian husband, to content herself with the shallow society of the wives of the camp officers, and soon to be crushed by the knowledge that the man for whom she had sacrificed everything was not even faithful to her.

During their travels, in 1821, Nicholas Nekrassov the future poet was born, and three years later his father left military service and settled in his estate in the Yaroslav Province, on the banks of the great river Volga, and close to the Vladimirsky highway, famous in Russian history as the road along which, for centuries, chained convicts had been driven from European Russia to the mines in Siberia. The old park of the manor, with its seven rippling brooklets and mysterious shadowy linden avenues more than a century old, filled with a dreamy murmur at the slightest stir of the breeze, stretched down to the mighty Volga, along the banks of which, during the long summer days, were heard the piteous, panting songs of the *burlaki*, the barge-

towers, who drag the heavy, loaded barges up and down the river.

The rattling of the convicts' chains as they passed; the songs of the *burlaki;* the pale, sorrowful face of his mother as she walked alone in the linden avenues of the garden, often shedding tears over a letter she read, which was headed by a coronet and written in a fine, delicate hand; the spreading green fields, the broad mighty river, the deep blue skies of Russia,—such were the reminiscences which Nekrassov retained from his earliest childhood. He loved his sad young mother with a childish passion, and in after years he was wont to relate how jealous he had been of that letter [1] she read so often, which always seemed to fill her with a sorrow he could not understand, making her at moments even forget that he was near her.

The sight and knowledge of deep human suffering, framed in the soft voluptuous beauty of nature in central Russia, could not fail to sow the seed of future poetical powers in the soul of an emotional child. His mother, who had been bred on Shakespeare, Milton, and the other great poets and writers of the West,

[1] Many years later, after his mother's death, Nekrassov found this letter among her papers. It was a letter written to her by her own mother after her flight and subsequent marriage. It announced to her her father's curse, and was filled with sad and bitter reproaches: "To whom have you entrusted your fate? For what country have you abandoned Poland, your Motherland? You, whose hand was sought, a priceless gift, by princes, have chosen a savage, ignorant, uncultured. . . . Forgive me, but my heart is bleeding. . . ."

devoted her solitary life to the development of higher intellectual tendencies in her gifted little son. And from an early age he made attempts at verse. His mother has preserved for the world his first little poem, which he presented to her when he was seven years of age, with a little heading, roughly to the following effect :

> My darling Mother, look at this,
> I did the best I could in it,
> Please read it through and tell me if
> You think there's any good in it.

The early life of the little Nekrassov was passed amid a series of contrasting pictures. His father, when he had abandoned his military calling and settled upon his estate, became the Chief of the district police. He would take his son Nicholas with him in his trap as he drove from village to village in the fulfilment of his new duties. The continual change of scenery during their frequent journeys along country roads, through forests and valleys, past meadows and rivers, the various types of people they met with, broadened and developed the mind of little Nekrassov, just as the mind of the child Ruskin was formed and expanded during his journeys with his father. But Ruskin's education lacked features with which young Nekrassov on his journeys soon became familiar. While acquiring knowledge of life and accumulating impressions of the beauties of nature, Nekrassov listened, perforce, to the brutal, blustering

speeches addressed by his father to the helpless, trembling peasants, and witnessed the cruel, degrading corporal punishments he inflicted upon them, while his eyes were speedily opened to his father's addiction to drinking, gambling, and debauchery. These experiences would most certainly have demoralised and depraved his childish mind had it not been for the powerful influence the refined and cultured mother had from the first exercised upon her son. The contrast between his parents was so startling that it could not fail to awaken the better side of the child's nature, and to imbue him with pure and healthy notions of the truer and higher ideals of humanity. In his poetical works of later years Nekrassov repeatedly returns to and dwells upon the memory of the sorrowful, sweet image of his mother. The gentle, beautiful lady, with her wealth of golden hair, with an expression of divine tenderness in her blue eyes and of infinite suffering upon her sensitive lips, remained for ever her son's ideal of womanhood. Later on, during years of manhood, in moments of the deepest moral suffering and despondency, it was always of her that he thought, her tenderness and spiritual consolation he recalled and for which he craved.

When Nekrassov was eleven years of age his father one day drove him to the town nearest their estate and placed him in the local grammar-school. Here he remained for six years, gradually, though without distinction, passing upwards from one class to another,

devoting a moderate amount of time to school studies and much energy to the writing of poetry, mostly of a satirical nature, in which his teachers figured with unfortunate conspicuity.

One day a copy-book containing the most biting of these productions fell into the hands of the headmaster, and young Nekrassov was summarily ejected from the school.

His angry father, deciding in his own mind that the boy was good for nothing, despatched him to St. Petersburg to embark upon a military career. The seventeen-year-old boy arrived in the capital with a copy-book of his poems and a few roubles in his pocket, and with a letter of introduction to an influential general. He was filled with good intentions and fully prepared to obey his father's orders, but before he had taken the final step of entering the nobleman's regiment he met a young student, a former school-mate, who captivated his imagination by glowing descriptions of the marvellous sciences to be studied in the university, and the surpassing interest of student life. The impressionable boy decided to abandon the idea of his military career, and to prepare for his matriculation in the university. He wrote to his father to this effect, and received the stern and laconic reply :

"If you disobey me, not another farthing shall you receive from me."

The youth had made his mind up, however, and entered the university as an unmatriculated student. And that was the beginning

of his long acquaintance with the hardships of poverty.

"For three years," said Nekrassov in after life, "I was hungry all day, and every day. It was not only that I ate bad food and not enough of that, but some days I did not eat at all. I often went to a certain restaurant in the Morskaya, where one is allowed to read the paper without ordering food. You can hold the paper in front of you and nibble at a piece of bread behind it. . . ."

While sunk in this state of poverty, however, Nekrassov got into touch with some of the richest and most aristocratic families in St. Petersburg; for at that time there existed a complete comradeship and equality among the students, whether their budget consisted of a few farthings or unlimited wealth. Thus here again Nekrassov was given the opportunity of studying the contrasts of life.

For several years after his arrival in St. Petersburg the true gifts of the poet were denied expression. The young man was confronted with a terrible uphill fight to conquer the means of bare subsistence. He had no time to devote to the working out of his poems, and it would not have "paid" him. He was obliged to accept any literary job that was offered him, and to execute it with a promptitude necessitated by the requirements of his daily bill of fare. During the first years of his literary career he wrote an amazing number of prose reviews, essays, short stories, novels, comedies and tragedies, alphabets and children's stories, which, put together, would

fill thirty or forty volumes. He also issued a volume of his early poems, but he was so ashamed of them that he would not put his name upon the fly-leaf. Soon, however, his poems, "On the Road" and "My Motherland," attracted the attention of Byelinsky, when the young poet brought some of his work to show the great critic. With tears in his eyes Byelinsky embraced Nekrassov and said to him:

"Do you know that you are a poet, a true poet?"

This decree of Byelinsky brought fame to Nekrassov, for Byelinsky's word was law in Russia then, and his judgement was never known to fail. His approval gave Nekrassov the confidence he lacked, and he began to devote most of his time to poetry.

The epoch in which Nekrassov began his literary career in St. Petersburg, the early forties of last century, was one of a great revival of idealism in Russia. The iron reaction of the then Emperor Nicholas I. made independent political activity an impossibility. But the horrible and degrading conditions of serfdom which existed at that time, and which cast a blight upon the energy and dignity of the Russian nation, nourished feelings of grief and indignation in the noblest minds of the educated classes, and, unable to struggle for their principles in the field of practical politics, they strove towards abstract idealism. They devoted their energies to philosophy, literature, and art. It was then that Tolstoy, Turgenieff, and Dostoyevsky

embarked upon their phenomenal careers in fiction. It was then that the impetuous essayist, Byelinsky, with his fiery and eloquent pen, taught the true meaning and objects of literature. Nekrassov soon joined the circles of literary people dominated by the spirit of Byelinsky, and he too drank at the fountain of idealism and imbibed the gospel of altruistic toil for his country and its people, that gospel of perfect citizenship expounded by Byelinsky, Granovsky, and their friends. It was at this period that his poetry became impregnated with the sadness which, later on, was embodied in the lines :

> My verses! Living witnesses of tears
> Shed for the world, and born
> In moments of the soul's dire agony,
> Unheeded and forlorn,
> Like waves that beat against the rocks,
> You plead to hearts that scorn.

Nekrassov's material conditions meanwhile began to improve, and he actually developed business capacities, and soon the greatest writers of the time were contributing to the monthly review *Sovremenik* (the Contemporary) which Nekrassov bought in 1847. Turgenieff, Herzen, Byelinsky, Dostoyevsky gladly sent their works to him, and Nekrassov soon became the intellectual leader of his time. His influence became enormous, but he had to cope with all the rigours of the censorship which had become almost insupportable in Russia, as the effect of the Tsar's fears aroused

by the events of the French Revolution of 1848.

Byelinsky died in that year from consumption in the very presence of the gendarmes who had come to arrest him for some literary offence. Dostoyevsky was seized, condemned to death, and when already on the scaffold, with the rope around his neck, reprieved and sent for life to the Siberian mines. The rigours still increased during the Crimean War, and it was only after the death of Nicholas I., the termination of the war, and the accession of the liberal Tsar, Alexander II., that Nekrassov and Russian literature in general began to breathe more freely. The decade which followed upon 1855 was one of the bright periods of Russian history. Serfdom was abolished and many great reforms were passed. It was then that Nekrassov's activity was at its height. His review *Sovremenik* was a stupendous success, and brought him great fame and wealth. During that year some of his finest poems appeared in it : " The Peasant Children," " Orina, the Mother of a Soldier," " The Gossips," " The Pedlars," " The Railway," and many others.

Nekrassov became the idol of Russia. The literary evenings at which he used to read his poems aloud were besieged by fervent devotees, and the most brilliant orations were addressed to him on all possible occasions. His greatest work, however, the national epic, *Who can be Happy in Russia?* was written towards the latter end of his life, between 1873 and 1877.

Here he suffered from the censor more

cruelly than ever. Long extracts from the poem were altogether forbidden, and only after his death it was allowed, in 1879, to appear in print more or less in its entirety.

When gripped in the throes of his last painful illness, and practically on his deathbed, he would still have found consolation in work, in the dictation of his poems. But even then his sufferings were aggravated by the harassing coercions of the censor. His last great poem was written on his deathbed, and the censor peremptorily forbade its publication. Nekrassov one day greeted his doctor with the following remark:

"Now you see what our profession, literature, means. When I wrote my first lines they were hacked to pieces by the censor's scissors—that was thirty-seven years ago; and now, when I am dying, and have written my last lines, I am again confronted by the scissors."

For many months he lay in appalling suffering. His disease was the outcome, he declared, of the privations he had suffered in his youth. The whole of Russia seemed to be standing at his bedside, watching with anguish his terrible struggle with death. Hundreds of letters and telegrams arrived daily from every corner of the immense empire, and the dying poet, profoundly touched by these tokens of love and sympathy, said to the literary friends who visited him:

"You see! We wonder all our lives what our readers think of us, whether they love us

and are our friends. We learn in moments like this. . . ."

It was a bright, frosty December day when Nekrassov's coffin was carried to the grave on the shoulders of friends who had loved and admired him. The orations delivered above it were full of passionate emotion called forth by the knowledge that the speakers were expressing not only their own sentiments, but those of a whole nation.

Nekrassov is dead. But all over Russia young and old repeat and love his poetry, so full of tenderness and grief and pity for the Russian people and their endless woe. Quotations from the works of Nekrassov are as abundant and widely known in Russia as those from Shakespeare in England, and no work of his is so familiar and so widely quoted as the national epic, now presented to the English public, *Who can be Happy in Russia?*

DAVID SOSKICE.

PROLOGUE

THE year doesn't matter,
The land's not important,
But seven good peasants
Once met on a high-road.
From Province "Hard-Battered,"
From District "Most Wretched,"
From "Destitute" Parish,
From neighbouring hamlets—
"Patched," "Barefoot," and "Shabby,"
"Bleak," "Burnt-Out," and "Hungry,"
From "Harvestless" also,
They met and disputed
Of who can, in Russia,
Be happy and free?

Luká said, "The pope,"[1]
And Román, "The Pomyéshchick,"[2]
Demyán, "The official,"
"The round-bellied merchant,"
Said both brothers Goóbin,
Mitródor and Ívan.
Pakhóm, who'd been lost
In profoundest reflection,
Exclaimed, looking down

[1] Priest. [2] Landowner.

At the earth, " 'Tis his Lordship,
His most mighty Highness,
The Tsar's Chief Adviser,"
And Prov said, " The Tsar."

Like bulls are the peasants :
Once folly is in them
You cannot dislodge it
Although you should beat them
With stout wooden cudgels :
They stick to their folly,
And nothing can move them.
They raised such a clamour
That those who were passing
Thought, " Surely the fellows
Have found a great treasure
And share it amongst them ! "

They all had set out
On particular errands :
The one to the blacksmith's,
Another in haste
To fetch Father Prokóffy
To christen his baby.
Pakhóm had some honey
To sell in the market ;
The two brothers Goóbin
Were seeking a horse
Which had strayed from their herd.

Long since should the peasants
Have turned their steps homewards,
But still in a row
They are hurrying onwards

As quickly as though
The grey wolf were behind them.
Still further, still faster
They hasten, contending.
Each shouts, nothing hearing,
And time does not wait.
In quarrel they mark not
The fiery-red sunset
Which blazes in Heaven
As evening is falling,
And all through the night
They would surely have wandered
If not for the woman,
The pox-pitted " Blank-wits,"
Who met them and cried :

" Heh, God-fearing peasants,
Pray, what is your mission ?
What seek ye abroad
In the blackness of midnight ? "

So shrilled the hag, mocking,
And shrieking with laughter
She slashed at her horses
And galloped away.

The peasants are startled,
Stand still, in confusion,
Since long night has fallen,
The numberless stars
Cluster bright in the heavens,
The moon gliding onwards.
Black shadows are spread
On the road stretched before

The impetuous walkers.
Oh, shadows, black shadows,
Say, who can outrun you,
Or who can escape you ?
Yet no one can catch you,
Entice, or embrace you !

Pakhóm, the old fellow,
Gazed long at the wood,
At the sky, at the roadway,
Gazed, silently searching
His brain for some counsel,
And then spake in this wise :
" Well, well, the wood-devil
Has finely bewitched us !
We've wandered at least
Thirty versts from our homes.
We all are too weary
To think of returning
To-night ; we must wait
Till the sun rise to-morrow."

Thus, blaming the devil,
The peasants make ready
To sleep by the roadside.
They light a large fire,
And collecting some farthings
Send two of their number
To buy them some vodka,
The rest cutting cups
From the bark of a birch-tree.
The vodka's provided,
Black bread, too, besides,
And they all begin feasting :
Each munches some bread

And drinks three cups of vodka—
  But then comes the question
Of who can, in Russia,
  Be happy and free ?

Luká cries, " The pope ! "
  And Román, " The Pomyéshchick ! "
And Prov shouts, " The Tsar ! "
And Demyán, " The official ! "
  " The round-bellied merchant ! "
Bawl both brothers Goóbin,
  Mitródor and Ívan.
Pakhóm shrieks, " His Lordship,
  His most mighty Highness,
The Tsar's Chief Adviser ! "

The obstinate peasants
  Grow more and more heated,
Cry louder and louder,
  Swear hard at each other ;
I really believe
  They'll attack one another !
Look ! now they are fighting !
  Román and Pakhóm close,
Demyán clouts Luká,
  While the two brothers Goóbin
Are drubbing fat Prov,
  And they all shout together.
Then wakes the clear echo,
  Runs hither and thither,
Runs calling and mocking
As if to encourage
  The wrath of the peasants.
The trees of the forest
  Throw furious words back :

"The Tsar!" "The Pomyéshchick!"
"The pope!" "The official!"
Until the whole coppice
Awakes in confusion;
The birds and the insects,
The swift-footed beasts
And the low crawling reptiles
Are chattering and buzzing
And stirring all round.
The timid grey hare
Springing out of the bushes
Speeds startled away;
The hoarse little jackdaw
Flies off to the top
Of a birch-tree, and raises
A harsh, grating shriek,
A most horrible clamour.
A weak little peewit
Falls headlong in terror
From out of its nest,
And the mother comes flying
In search of her fledgeling.
She twitters in anguish.
Alas! she can't find it.
The crusty old cuckoo
Awakes and bethinks him
To call to a neighbour:
Ten times he commences
And gets out of tune,
But he won't give it up . . .

Call, call, little cuckoo,
For all the young cornfields
Will shoot into ear soon,
And then it will choke you—

The ripe golden grain,
  And your day will be ended ![1]

From out the dark forest
  Fly seven brown owls,
And on seven tall pine-trees
  They settle themselves
To enjoy the disturbance.
  They laugh—birds of night—
And their huge yellow eyes gleam
  Like fourteen wax candles.
The raven—the wise one—
  Sits perched on a tree
In the light of the fire,
  Praying hard to the devil
That one of the wranglers,
  At least, should be beaten
To death in the tumult.
  A cow with a bell
Which had strayed from its fellows
  The evening before,
Upon hearing men's voices
  Comes out of the forest
And into the firelight,
  And fixing its eyes,
Large and sad, on the peasants,
  Stands listening in silence
Some time to their raving,
  And then begins mooing,
Most heartily moos.
The silly cow moos,
  The jackdaw is screeching,
The turbulent peasants

[1] The peasants assert that the cuckoo chokes himself with young ears of corn.

Still shout, and the echo
Maliciously mocks them—
The impudent echo
Who cares but for mocking
And teasing good people,
For scaring old women
And innocent children :
Though no man has seen it
We've all of us heard it ;
It lives—without body ;
It speaks—without tongue.

The pretty white owl
Called the Duchess of Moscow
Comes plunging about
In the midst of the peasants,
Now circling above them,
Now striking the bushes
And earth with her body.
And even the fox, too,
The cunning old creature,
With woman's determined
And deep curiosity,
Creeps to the firelight
And stealthily listens ;
At last, quite bewildered,
She goes ; she is thinking,
" The devil himself
Would be puzzled, I know ! "

And really the wranglers
Themselves have forgotten
The cause of the strife.

But after awhile
Having pummelled each other

Sufficiently soundly,
They come to their senses;
They drink from a rain-pool
And wash themselves also,
And then they feel sleepy.
And, meanwhile, the peewit,
The poor little fledgeling,
With short hops and flights
Had come fluttering towards them.
Pakhóm took it up
In his palm, held it gently
Stretched out to the firelight,
And looked at it, saying,
"You are but a mite,
Yet how sharp is your claw;
If I breathed on you once
You'd be blown to a distance,
And if I should sneeze
You would straightway be wafted
Right into the flames.
One flick from my finger
Would kill you entirely.
Yet you are more powerful,
More free than the peasant:
Your wings will grow stronger,
And then, little birdie,
You'll fly where it please you.
Come, give us your wings, now,
You frail little creature,
And we will go flying
All over the Empire,
To seek and inquire,
To search and discover
The man who in Russia—
Is happy and free."

" No wings would be needful
If we could be certain
Of bread every day ;
For then we could travel
On foot at our leisure,"
Said Prov, of a sudden
Grown weary and sad.

" But not without vodka,
A bucket each morning,"
Cried both brothers Goóbin,
Mitródor and Ívan,
Who dearly loved vodka.

" Salt cucumbers, also,
Each morning a dozen ! "
The peasants cry, jesting.

" Sour qwass,[1] too, a jug
To refresh us at mid-day ! "

" A can of hot tea
Every night ! " they say, laughing.

But while they were talking
The little bird's mother
Was flying and wheeling
In circles above them ;
She listened to all,
And descending just near them
She chirruped, and making
A brisk little movement
She said to Pakhóm
In a voice clear and human :
" Release my poor child,
I will pay a great ransom."

[1] A kind of home-brewed cider.

" And what is your offer ? "

" A loaf each a day
And a bucket of vodka,
Salt cucumbers also,
Each morning a dozen,
At mid-day sour qwass
And hot tea in the evening."

" And where, little bird,"
Asked the two brothers Goóbin,
" And where will you find
Food and drink for all seven ? "

" Yourselves you will find it,
But I will direct you
To where you will find it."

" Well, speak. We will listen."

" Go straight down the road,
Count the poles until thirty :
Then enter the forest
And walk for a verst.
By then you'll have come
To a smooth little lawn
With two pine-trees upon it.
Beneath these two pine-trees
Lies buried a casket
Which you must discover.
The casket is magic,
And in it there lies
An enchanted white napkin.
Whenever you wish it
This napkin will serve you
With food and with vodka :
You need but say softly,
' O napkin enchanted,

Give food to the peasants!'
At once, at your bidding,
Through my intercession
The napkin will serve you.
And now, free my child."

"But wait. We are poor,
And we're thinking of making
A very long journey,"
Pakhóm said. "I notice
That you are a bird
Of remarkable talent.
So charm our old clothing
To keep it upon us."

"Our coats, that they fall not
In tatters," Román said.

"Our laputs,[1] that they too
May last the whole journey,"
Demyán next demanded.

"Our shirts, that the fleas
May not breed and annoy us,"
Luká added lastly.

The little bird answered,
"The magic white napkin
Will mend, wash, and dry for you.
Now free my child."

Pakhóm then spread open
His palm, wide and spacious,
Releasing the fledgeling,
Which fluttered away
To a hole in a pine-tree.
The mother who followed it
Added, departing:

[1] *Laput* is peasants' footgear made of bark of saplings.

" But one thing remember :
Food, summon at pleasure
As much as you fancy,
But vodka, no more
Than a bucket a day.
If once, even twice
You neglect my injunction
Your wish shall be granted ;
The third time, take warning :
Misfortune will follow."

The peasants set off
In a file, down the road,
Count the poles until thirty
And enter the forest,
And, silently counting
Each footstep, they measure
A verst as directed.
They find the smooth lawn
With the pine-trees upon it,
They dig all together
And soon reach the casket ;
They open it—there lies
The magic white napkin !
They cry in a chorus,
" O napkin enchanted,
Give food to the peasants ! "

Look, look ! It's unfolding !
Two hands have come floating
From no one sees where ;
Place a bucket of vodka,
A large pile of bread
On the magic white napkin,
And dwindle away.

" The cucumbers, tea,
And sour qwass—where are they then ? "
At once they appear!

The peasants unloosen
Their waistbelts, and gather
Around the white napkin
To hold a great banquet.
In joy, they embrace
One another, and promise
That never again
Will they beat one another
Without sound reflection,
But settle their quarrels
In reason and honour
As God has commanded ;
That nought shall persuade them
To turn their steps homewards
To kiss wives and children,
To see the old people,
Until they have settled
For once and forever
The subject of discord :
Until they've discovered
The man who, in Russia,
Is happy and free.

They swear to each other
To keep this, their promise,
And daybreak beholds them
Embosomed in slumber
As deep and as dreamless
As that of the dead.

PART I

CHAPTER I

THE POPE[1]

The broad sandy high-road
  With borders of birch-trees
Winds sadly and drearily
  Into the distance;
On either hand running
  Low hills and young cornfields,
Green pastures, and often—
  More often than any—
Lands sterile and barren.
And near to the rivers
  And ponds are the hamlets
And villages standing—
  The old and the new ones.
The forests and meadows
  And rivers of Russia
  Are lovely in springtime,
But O you spring cornfields,
  Your growth thin and scanty
Is painful to see.

[1] Priest.

" 'Twas not without meaning
That daily the snow fell
  Throughout the long winter,"
Said one to another
  The journeying peasants :—
" The spring has now come
  And the snow tells its story :
At first it is silent—
  'Tis silent in falling,
Lies silently sleeping,
  But when it is dying
Its voice is uplifted :
  The fields are all covered
With loud, rushing waters,
  No roads can be traversed
For bringing manure
  To the aid of the cornfields ;
The season is late
  For the sweet month of May
Is already approaching."
  The peasant is saddened
At sight of the dirty
  And squalid old village ;
But sadder the new ones :
  The new huts are pretty,
But they are the token
  Of heartbreaking ruin.[1]
As morning sets in
  They begin to meet people,
But mostly small people :
  Their brethren, the peasants,
And soldiers and waggoners,
  Workmen and beggars.

[1] New huts are built only when the village has been destroyed by fire.

The soldiers and beggars
They pass without speaking,
Not asking if happy
Or grievous their lot :
The soldier, we know,
Shaves his beard with a gimlet,
Has nothing but smoke
In the winter to warm him,—
What joy can be his ?

As evening is falling
Appears on the high-road
A pope in his cart.
The peasants uncover
Their heads, and draw up
In a line on the roadway,
Thus barring the passage
In front of the gelding.
The pope raised his head,
Looked inquiringly at them.
" Fear not, we won't harm you,"
Luká said in answer.
(Luká was thick-bearded,
Was heavy and stolid,
Was obstinate, stupid,
And talkative too ;
He was like to the windmill
Which differs in one thing
Alone from an eagle :
No matter how boldly
It waves its broad pinions
It rises no higher.)

" We, orthodox peasants,
From District ' Most Wretched,'
From Province ' Hard Battered,'

From ' Destitute ' Parish,
  From neighbouring hamlets,
' Patched,' ' Barefoot,' and ' Shabby,'
  ' Bleak,' ' Burnt-Out,' and ' Hungry,'
From ' Harvestless ' also,
  Are striving to settle
A thing of importance ;
A trouble torments us,
  It draws us away
From our wives and our children,
  Away from our work,
Kills our appetites too.
  Pray, give us your promise
To answer us truly,
  Consulting your conscience
And searching your knowledge,
Not feigning nor mocking
  The question we put you.
If not, we will go
  Further on."

" I will promise
If you will but put me
  A serious question
To answer it gravely,
  With truth and with reason,
Not feigning nor mocking,
  Amen ! "

" We are grateful,
And this is our story :
  We all had set out
On particular errands,
  And met in the roadway.
Then one asked another :

Who is he,—the man
Free and happy in Russia ?
And I said, ' The pope,'
And Román, ' The Pomyéshchick,'
And Prov said, ' The Tsar,'
And Demyán, ' The official ' ;
' The round-bellied merchant,'
Said both brothers Goóbin,
Mitródor and Ívan ;
Pakhóm said, ' His Lordship,
The Tsar's Chief Adviser.'

" Like bulls are the peasants ;
Once folly is in them
You cannot dislodge it
Although you should beat them
With stout wooden cudgels,
They stick to their folly
And nothing can move them.
We argued and argued,
While arguing quarrelled,
While quarrelling fought,
Till at last we decided
That never again
Would we turn our steps homeward
To kiss wives and children,
To see the old people,
Until we have found
The reply to our question,
Until we've discovered
For once and forever
The man who, in Russia,
Is happy and free.
Then say, in God's truth,
Is the pope's life a sweet one ?

Would you, honoured father,
Proclaim yourself happy ? ”

The pope in his cart
Cast his eyes on the roadway,
Fell thoughtful and answered :

“ Then, Christians, come, hear me :
I will not complain
Of the cross that I carry,
But bear it in silence.
I'll tell you my story,
And you try to follow
As well as you can.”

“ Begin.”

“ But first tell me
The gifts you consider
As true earthly welfare ;
Peace, honour, and riches,—
Is that so, my children ? ”

They answer, “ It is so.”

“ And now let us see, friends,
What peace does the pope get ?
In truth, then, I ought
To begin from my childhood,
For how does the son
Of the pope gain his learning,
And what is the price
That he pays for the priesthood ?
'Tis best to be silent.[1]

* * * * *

[1] The lines of asterisks throughout the poem represent passages that were censored in the original.

"Our roadways are poor
And our parishes large,
And the sick and the dying,
The new-born that call us,
Do not choose their season:
In harvest and hay-time,
In dark nights of autumn,
Through frosts in the winter,
Through floods in the springtime,
Go—where they may call you.
You go without murmur,
If only the body
Need suffer alone!
But no,—every moment
The heart's deepest feelings
Are strained and tormented.
Believe me, my children,
Some things on this earth
One can never get used to:
No heart there exists
That can bear without anguish
The rattle of death,
The lament for the lost one,
The sorrow of orphans,
Amen! Now you see, friends,
The peace that the pope gets."

Not long did the peasants
Stand thinking. They waited
To let the pope rest,
Then enquired with a bow:
"And what more will you tell us?"
"Well, now let us see
If the pope is much honoured;
And that, O my friends,

Is a delicate question—
I fear to offend you. . . .
But answer me, Christians,
Whom call you, ' The cursed
Stallion breed ? ' Can you tell me ? "

The peasants stand silent
In painful confusion ;
The pope, too, is silent.

" Who is it you tremble
To meet in the roadway [1]
For fear of misfortune ? "

The peasants stand shuffling
Their feet in confusion.

" Of whom do you make
Little scandalous stories ?
Of whom do you sing
Rhymes and songs most indecent ?
The pope's honoured wife,
And his innocent daughters,
Come, how do you treat them ?
At whom do you shout
Ho, ho, ho, in derision
When once you are past him ? "

The peasants cast downwards
Their eyes and keep silent,
The pope too is silent.

[1] There is a superstition among the Russian peasants that it is an ill omen to meet the " pope " when going upon an errand.

The peasants stand musing;
The pope fans his face
With his hat, high and broad-rimmed,
And looks at the heavens. . . .

The cloudlets in springtime
Play round the great sun
Like small grandchildren frisking
Around a hale grandsire,
And now, on his right side
A bright little cloud
Has grown suddenly dismal,
Begins to shed tears.
The grey thread is hanging
In rows to the earth,
While the red sun is laughing
And beaming upon it
Through torn fleecy clouds,
Like a merry young girl
Peeping out from the corn.
The cloud has moved nearer,
The rain begins here,
And the pope puts his hat on.
But on the sun's right side
The joy and the brightness
Again are established.
The rain is now ceasing. . . .
It stops altogether,
And God's wondrous miracle,
Long golden sunbeams,
Are streaming from Heaven
In radiant splendour.

* * * * *

"It isn't our own fault;
It comes from our parents,"

Say, after long silence,
The two brothers Goóbin.
The others approve him :
" It isn't our own fault,
It comes from our parents."

The pope said, " So be it !
But pardon me, Christians,
It is not my meaning
To censure my neighbours ;
I spoke but desiring
To tell you the truth.
You see how the pope
Is revered by the peasants ;
The gentry—— "
" Pass over them,
Father—we know them."
" Then let us consider
From whence the pope's riches.
In times not far distant
The great Russian Empire
Was filled with estates
Of wealthy Pomyéshchicks.[1]
They lived and increased,
And they let us live too.
What weddings were feasted !
What numbers and numbers
Of children were born
In each rich, merry life-time !
Although they were haughty
And often oppressive,
What liberal masters !
They never deserted

[1] Landowners.

The parish, they married,
Were baptized within it,
To us they confessed,
And by us they were buried.
And if a Pomyéshchick
Should chance for some reason
To live in a city,
He cherished one longing,
To die in his birthplace;
But did the Lord will it
That he should die suddenly
Far from the village,
An order was found
In his papers, most surely,
That he should be buried
At home with his fathers.
Then see—the black car
With the six mourning horses,—
The heirs are conveying
The dead to the graveyard;
And think—what a lift
For the pope, and what feasting
All over the village!
But now that is ended,
Pomyéshchicks are scattered
Like Jews over Russia
And all foreign countries.
They seek not the honour
Of lying with fathers
And mothers together.
How many estates
Have passed into the pockets
Of rich speculators!
O you, bones so pampered
Of great Russian gentry,

Where are you not buried,
What far foreign graveyard
Do you not repose in ?

"Myself from dissenters [1]
(A source of pope's income)
I never take money,
I've never transgressed,
For I never had need to ;
Because in my parish
Two-thirds of the people
Are Orthodox churchmen.
But districts there are
Where the whole population
Consists of dissenters—
Then how can the pope live ?

"But all in this world
Is subjected to changes :
The laws which in old days
Applied to dissenters
Have now become milder ;
And that in itself
Is a check to pope's income.
I've said the Pomyéshchicks
Are gone, and no longer
They seek to return
To the home of their childhood ;
And then of their ladies
(Rich, pious old women),
How many have left us
To live near the convents !

[1] Dissenters in Russia are subjected to numerous religious restrictions. Therefore they are obliged to bribe the local orthodox pope, in order that he should not denounce them to the police.

And nobody now
Gives the pope a new cassock
Or church-work embroidered.
He lives on the peasants,
Collects their brass farthings,
Their cakes on the feast-days,
At Easter their eggs.
The peasants are needy
Or they would give freely—
Themselves they have nothing;
And who can take gladly
The peasant's last farthing?

"Their lands are so poor,
They are sand, moss, or boggy,
Their cattle half-famished,
Their crops yield but twofold;
And should Mother Earth
Chance at times to be kinder,
That too is misfortune:
The market is crowded,
They sell for a trifle
To pay off the taxes.
Again comes a bad crop—
Then pay for your bread
Three times higher than ever,
And sell all your cattle!
Now, pray to God, Christians,
For this year again
A great misery threatens:
We ought to have sown
For a long time already;
But look you—the fields
Are all deluged and useless. . . .
O God, have Thou pity

And send a round [1] rainbow
To shine in Thy heavens ! "

Then taking his hat off
He crossed himself thrice,
And the peasants did likewise.

" Our village is poor
And the people are sickly,
The women are sad
And are scantily nourished,
But pious and laborious ;
God give them courage !
Like slaves do they toil ;
'Tis hard to lay hands
On the fruits of such labour.

" At times you are sent for
To pray by the dying,
But Death is not really
The awful thing present,
But rather the living—
The family losing
Their only support.
You pray by the dead.
Words of comfort you utter,
To calm the bereaved ones ;
And then the old mother
Comes tottering towards you,
And stretching her bony
And toil-blistered hand out ;
You feel your heart sicken,
For there in the palm

[1] There is a Russian superstition that a round rainbow is sent as a sign of coming dry weather.

Lie the precious brass farthings !
Of course it is only
The price of your praying.
You take it, because
It is what you must live on ;
Your words of condolence
Are frozen, and blindly,
Like one deep insulted,
You make your way homeward.
Amen. . . ."

* * * * *

The pope finished
His speech, and touched lightly
The back of the gelding.
The peasants make way,
And they bow to him deeply.
The cart moves on slowly,
Then six of the comrades
As though by agreement
Attack poor Luká
With indignant reproaches.

" Now, what have you got ?—
You great obstinate blockhead,
You log of the village !
You too must needs argue ;
Pray what did you tell us ?
' The popes live like princes,
The lords of the belfry,
Their palaces rising
As high as the heavens,
Their bells set a-chiming
All over God's world.

" ' Three years,' you declared,
' Did I work as pope's servant.

It wasn't a life—
'Twas a strawberry, brethren;
Pope's kasha [1] is made
And served up with fresh butter,
Pope's stchee [1] made with fish,
And pope's pie stuffed to bursting;
The pope's wife is fat too,
And white the pope's daughter,
His horse like a barrel,
His bees are all swollen
And booming like church bells.'

"Well, there's your pope's life,—
There's your 'strawberry,' boaster!
For that you've been shouting
And making us quarrel,
You limb of the Devil!
Pray is it because
Of your beard like a shovel
You think you're so clever?
If so, let me tell you
The goat walked in Eden
With just such another
Before Father Adam,
And yet down to our time
The goat is considered
The greatest of duffers!"

The culprit was silent,
Afraid of a beating;
And he would have got it
Had not the pope's face,
Turning sadly upon them,

[1] *Kasha* and *stchee* are two national dishes.

Looked over a hedge
At a rise in the road.

CHAPTER II

THE VILLAGE FAIR

No wonder the peasants
Dislike a wet spring-tide :
The peasant needs greatly
A spring warm and early.
This year, though he howl
Like a wolf, I'm afraid
That the sun will not gladden
The earth with his brightness.
The clouds wander heavily,
Dropping the rain down
Like cows with full udders.
The snow has departed,
Yet no blade of grass,
Not a tiny green leaflet,
Is seen in the meadows.
The earth has not ventured
To don its new mantle
Of brightest green velvet,
But lies sad and bare
Like a corpse without grave-clothes
Beneath the dull heavens.
One pities the peasant ;
Still more, though, his cattle ;
For when they have eaten
The scanty reserves
Which remain from the winter,
Their master will drive them

To graze in the meadows,
And what will they find there
  But bare, inky blackness ?
Nor settled the weather
  Until it was nearing
The feast of St. Nichol,
  And then the poor cattle
Enjoyed the green pastures.

The day is a hot one,
The peasants are strolling
  Along 'neath the birch-trees.
They say to each other,
  " We passed through one village,
We passed through another,
  And both were quite empty ;
To-day is a feast-day,
  But where are the people ? "

They reach a large village ;
The street is deserted
  Except for small children,
And inside the houses
  Sit only the oldest
Of all the old women.
  The wickets are fastened
Securely with padlocks ;
  The padlock's a loyal
And vigilant watch-dog ;
  It barks not, it bites not,
But no one can pass it.

They walk through the village
And see a clear mirror
  Beset with green framework—
A pond full of water ;

And over its surface
Are hovering swallows
And all kinds of insects;
The gnats quick and meagre
Skip over the water
As though on dry land;
And in the laburnums
Which grow on the banksides
The landrails are squeaking.

A raft made of tree-trunks
Floats near, and upon it
The pope's heavy daughter
Is wielding her beetle,
She looks like a hay-stack,
Unsound and dishevelled,
Her skirts gathered round her.
Upon the raft, near her,
A duck and some ducklings
Are sleeping together.

And hark! from the water
The neigh of a horse comes;
The peasants are startled,
They turn all together:
Two heads they see, moving
Along through the water—
The one is a peasant's,
A black head and curly,
In one ear an ear-ring
Which gleams in the sunlight;
A horse's the other,
To which there is fastened
A rope of some yards length,
Held tight in the teeth

Of the peasant beside it.
The man swims, the horse swims;
The horse neighs, the man neighs;
They make a fine uproar!
The raft with the woman
And ducklings upon it
Is tossing and heaving.

The horse with the peasant
Astride has come panting
From out of the water,
The man with white body
And throat black with sunburn;
The water is streaming
From horse and from rider.

"Say, why is your village
So empty of people?
Are all dead and buried?"

"They've gone to Kousminsky;
A fair's being held there
Because it's a saint's day."

"How far is Kousminsky?"
"Three versts, I should fancy."
"We'll go to Kousminsky,"
The peasants decided,
And each to himself thought,
"Perhaps we shall find there
The happy, the free one."

The village Kousminsky
Is rich and commercial
And terribly dirty.
It's built on a hill-side,

And slopes down the valley,
Then climbs again upwards,—
So how could one ask of it
Not to be dirty ? [1]
It boasts of two churches.
The one is " dissenting,"
The other " Established."
The house with inscription,
" The School-House," is empty,
In ruins and deserted ;
And near stands the barber's,
A hut with one window,
From which hangs the sign-board
Of " Barber and Bleeder."
A dirty inn also
There is, with its sign-board
Adorned by a picture :
A great nosy tea-pot
With plump little tea-cups
Held out by a waiter,
Suggesting a fat goose
Surrounded by goslings.
A row of small shops, too,
There is in the village.

The peasants go straight
To the market-place, find there
A large crowd of people
And goods in profusion.
How strange !—notwithstanding
There's no church procession
The men have no hats on,

[1] The mud and water from the high lands on both sides descend and collect in the villages so situated, which are often nearly transformed into swamps during the rainy season.

Are standing bare-headed,
As though in the presence
Of some holy Image :
Look, how they're being swallowed—
The hoods of the peasants.[1]

The beer-shop and tavern
Are both overflowing ;
All round are erected
Large tents by the roadside
For selling of vodka.
And though in each tent
There are five agile waiters,
All young and most active,
They find it quite hopeless
To try to get change right.
Just look how the peasants
Are stretching their hands out,
With hoods, shirts, and waistcoats !

Oh, you, thirst of Russia,
Unquenchable, endless
You are ! But the peasant,
When once he is sated,
Will soon get a new hood
At close of the fair. . . .

The spring sun is playing
On heads hot and drunken,
On boisterous revels,
On bright mixing colours ;
The men wear wide breeches
Of corduroy velvet,
With gaudy striped waistcoats

[1] On feast days the peasants often pawn their clothes for drink.

And shirts of all colours ;
The women wear scarlet ;
The girls' plaited tresses
Are decked with bright ribbons ;
They glide about proudly,
Like swans on the water.
Some beauties are even
Attired in the fashion
Of Petersburg ladies ;
Their dresses spread stiffly
On wide hoops around them ;
But tread on their skirts—
They will turn and attack you,
Will gobble like turkeys !

Blame rather the fashion
Which fastens upon you
Great fishermen's baskets !

A woman dissenter
Looks darkly upon them,
And whispers with malice :
" A famine, a famine
Most surely will blight us.
The young growths are sodden,
The floods unabated ;
Since women have taken
To red cotton dresses
The forests have withered,
And wheat—but no wonder ! "

" But why, little Mother,
Are red cotton dresses
To blame for the trouble ?
I don't understand you."
" The cotton is *French*,

And it's reddened in dog's blood !
D'you understand now ? "

The peasants still linger
Some time in the market,
Then go further upward,
To where on the hill-side
Are piled ploughs and harrows,
With rakes, spades, and hatchets,
And all kinds of iron-ware,
And pliable wood
To make rims for the cart-wheels.
And, oh, what a hubbub
Of bargaining, swearing,
Of jesting and laughter !
And who could help laughing ?

A limp little peasant
Is bending and testing
The wood for the wheel-rims.
One piece does not please him ;
He takes up another
And bends it with effort ;
It suddenly straightens,
And whack !—strikes his forehead.
The man begins roaring,
Abusing the bully,
The duffer, the block-head.
Another comes driving
A cart full of wood-ware,
As tipsy as can be ;
He turns it all over !
The axle is broken,
And, trying to mend it,
He smashes the hatchet.

He gazes upon it,
Abusing, reproaching :
" A villain, a villain,
You are—not a hatchet.
You see, you can't do me
The least little service.
The whole of your life
You spend bowing before me,
And yet you insult me ! "

Our peasants determine
To see the shop windows,
The handkerchiefs, ribbons,
And stuffs of bright colour ;
And near to the boot-shop
Is fresh cause for laughter ;
For here an old peasant
Most eagerly bargains
For small boots of goat-skin
To give to his grandchild.
He asks the price five times ;
Again and again
He has turned them all over ;
He finds they are faultless.

" Well, Uncle, pay up now,
Or else be off quickly,"
The seller says sharply.
But wait ! The old fellow
Still gazes, and fondles
The tiny boots softly,
And then speaks in this wise :

" My daughter won't scold me,
Her husband I'll spit at,
My wife—let her grumble—

I'll spit at my wife too.
It's her that I pity—
My poor little grandchild.
She clung to my neck,
And she said, ' Little Grandfather,
Buy me a present.'
Her soft little ringlets
Were tickling my cheek,
And she kissed the old Grand-dad.
You wait, little bare-foot,
Wee spinning-top, wait then,
Some boots I will buy you,
Some boots made of goat-skin."
And then must old Vavil
Begin to boast grandly,
To promise a present
To old and to young.
But now his last farthing
Is swallowed in vodka,
And how can he dare
Show his eyes in the village ?
" My daughter won't scold me,
Her husband I'll spit at,
My wife—let her grumble—
I'll spit at my wife too.
It's her that I pity—
My poor little grandchild."

And then he commences
The story again
Of the poor little grandchild.
He's very dejected.
A crowd listens round him,
Not laughing, but troubled
At sight of his sorrow.

If they could have helped him
With bread or by labour
They soon would have done so,
But money is money,
And who has got tenpence
To spare? Then came forward
Pavlóosha Varénko,
The "gentleman" nicknamed.
(His origin, past life,
Or calling they knew not,
But called him the 'Barin'.)
He listened with pleasure
To talk and to jesting;
His blouse, coat, and top-boots
Were those of a peasant;
He sang Russian folk-songs,
Liked others to sing them,
And often was met with
At taverns and inns.
He now rescued Vavil,
And bought him the boots
To take home to his grandchild.

The old man fled blindly,
But clasping them tightly,
Forgetting to thank him,
Bewildered with joy.
The crowd was as pleased, too,
As if had been given
To each one a rouble.

The peasants next visit
The picture and book stall;
The pedlars are buying
Their stock of small pictures,

And books for their baskets
To sell on the road.

" 'Tis generals, *you* want ! "
The merchant is saying.

" Well, give us some generals ;
But look—on your conscience—
Now let them be real ones,
Be fat and ferocious."

" Your notions are funny,"
The merchant says, smiling ;
" It isn't a question
Of looks. . . ."

" Well, of what, then ?
You want to deceive us,
To palm off your rubbish,
You swindling impostor !
D'you think that the peasants
Know one from another ?
A shabby one—he wants
An expert to sell him,
But trust me to part with
The fat and the fierce."

" You don't want officials ? "

" To Hell with officials ! "

However they took one
Because he was cheap :
A minister, striking
In view of his stomach
As round as a barrel,
And seventeen medals.

The merchant is serving
With greatest politeness,
Displaying and praising,
With patience unyielding,—
A thief of the first-class
He is, come from Moscow.
Of Blücher he sells them
A hundred small pictures,
As many of Fótyi [1]
The archimandrite,
And of Sipko [1] the brigand;
A book of the sayings
Of droll Balakireff,[1]
The "English Milord," too.
The books were put into
The packs of the pedlars;
The pictures will travel
All over great Russia,
Until they find rest
On the wall of some peasant—
The devil knows why!

Oh, may it come quickly
The time when the peasant
Will make some distinction
Between book and book,
Between picture and picture;
Will bring from the market,
Not picture of Blücher,
Not stupid "Milord,"
But Belinsky and Gógol!
Oh, say, Russian people,
These names—have you heard them?
They're great. They were borne

[1] Well-known popular characters in Russia.

By your champions, who loved you,
Who strove in your cause,
'Tis *their* little portraits
Should hang in your houses!

"I'd walk into Heaven
But can't find the doorway!"
Is suddenly shouted
By some merry blade.
"What door do you want, man?"
"The puppet-show, brothers!"
"I'll show you the way!"

The puppet-show tempted
The journeying peasants;
They go to inspect it.
A farce is being acted,
A goat for the drummer;
Real music is playing—
No common accordion.
The play is not too deep,
But not stupid, either.
A bullet shot deftly
Right into the eye
Of the hated policeman.
The tent is quite crowded,
The audience cracking
Their nuts, and exchanging
Remarks with each other.
And look—there's the vodka!
They're drinking and looking,
And looking and drinking,
Enjoying it highly,
With jubilant faces,
From time to time throwing

A right witty word
Into Peterkin's speeches,
Which *you'd* never hit on,
Although you should swallow
Your pen and your pad ! . . .

Some folk there are always
Who crowd on the platform
(The comedy ended),
To greet the performers,
To gossip and chat.

" How now, my fine fellows,
And where do you come from ? "

" As serfs we used only
To play for the masters,[1]
But now we are free,
And the man who will treat us
Alone is our Master ! "
" Well spoken, my brothers ;
Enough time you've wasted
Amusing the nobles ;
Now play for the peasants !
Here, waiter, bring vodka,
Sweet wine, tea, and syrup,
And see you make haste ! "

The sweet sparkling river
Comes rolling to meet them ;
They'll treat the musicians
More handsomely, far,
Than their masters of old.

[1] Each landowner kept his own band of musicians.

It is not the rushing
  Of furious whirlwinds,
Not Mother Earth shaking—
  'Tis shouting and singing
And swearing and fighting
And falling and kissing—
  The people's carouse!
It seems to the peasants
  That all in the village
Was reeling around them!
  That even the church
With the very tall steeple
  Had swayed once or twice!

When things are in this state,
  A man who is sober
Feels nearly as awkward
  As one who is naked. . . .

The peasants recrossing
  The market-place, quitted
The turbulent village
  At evening's approach.

CHAPTER III

THE DRUNKEN NIGHT

This village did not end,
As many in Russia,
  In windmill or tavern,

In corn-loft or barn,
But in a large building
Of wood, with iron gratings
In small narrow windows.
The broad, sandy high-road,
With borders of birch-trees,
Spread out straight behind it—
The grim étape—prison.[1]
On week-days deserted
It is, dull and silent,
But now it is not so.
All over the high-road,
In neighbouring pathways,
Wherever the eye falls,
Are lying and crawling,
Are driving and climbing,
The numberless drunkards;
Their shout fills the skies.

The cart-wheels are screeching,
And like slaughtered calves' heads
Are nodding and wagging
The pates limp and helpless
Of peasants asleep.

They're dropping on all sides,
As if from some ambush
An enemy firing
Is shooting them wholesale.
The quiet night is falling,
The moon is in Heaven,
And God is commencing
To write His great letter

[1] The halting-place for prisoners on their way to Siberia.

Of gold on blue velvet;
Mysterious message,
Which neither the wise man
Nor foolish can read.

The high-road is humming
Just like a great bee-hive;
The people's loud clamour
Is swelling and falling
Like waves in the ocean.

"We paid him a rouble—
The clerk, and he gave us
A written petition
To send to the Governor."

"Hi, you with the waggon,
Look after your corn!"

"But where are you off to,
Olyénushka? Wait now—
I've still got some cakes.
You're like a black flea, girl,
You eat all you want to
And hop away quickly
Before one can stroke you!"

"It's all very fine talk,
This Tsar's precious Charter,
It's not writ for us!"

"Give way there, you people!"
The exciseman dashes
Amongst them, his brass plate
Attached to his coat-front,
And bells all a-jangle.

" God save us, Parasha,
Don't go to St. Petersburg!
I know the gentry:
By day you're a maid,
And by night you're a mistress.
You spit at it, love. . . ."

" Now, where are you running?"
The pope bellows loudly
To busy Pavloósha,
The village policeman.

" An accident's happened
Down here, and a man's killed."

" God pardon our sins!"

" How thin you've got, Dashka!"

" The spinning-wheel fattens
By turning forever;
I work just as hard,
But I never get fatter."

" Heh, you, silly fellow,
Come hither and love me!
The dirty, dishevelled,
And tipsy old woman,
The f—i—ilthy o—l—d woman!"

Our peasants, observing,
Are still walking onwards.
They see just before them
A meek little fellow
Most busily digging
A hole in the road.

" Now, what are you doing ? "
" A grave I am digging
To bury my mother ! "

" You fool !—Where's your mother ?
Your new coat you've buried !
Roll into the ditch,
Dip your snout in the water.
'Twill cool you, perhaps."

" Let's see who'll pull hardest ! "
Two peasants are squatting,
And, feet to feet pressing,
Are straining and groaning,
And tugging away
At a stick held between them.
This soon fails to please them :
" Let's try with our beards ! "
And each man then clutches
The jaw of the other,
And tugs at his beard !
Red, panting, and writhing,
And gasping and yelping,
But pulling and pulling !
" Enough there, you madmen ! . . ."
Cold water won't part them !

And in the ditch near them
Two women are squabbling ;
One cries, " To go home now
Were worse than to prison ! "
The other, " You braggart !
In my house, I tell you,
It's worse than in yours.
One son-in-law punched me

And left a rib broken ;
The second made off
With my big ball of cotton ;
The cotton don't matter,
But in it was hidden
My rouble in silver.
The youngest—he always
Is up with his knife out.
He'll kill me for sure ! "

" Enough, enough, darling !
Now don't you be angry ! "
Is heard not far distant
From over a hillock—
" Come on, I'm all right ! "

A mischievous night, this ;
On right hand, on left hand,
Wherever the eye falls,
Are sauntering couples.
The wood seems to please them ;
They all stroll towards it,
The wood—which is thrilling
With nightingales' voices.
And later, the high-road
Gets more and more ugly,
And more and more often
The people are falling,
Are staggering, crawling,
Or lying like corpses.
As always it happens
On feast days in Russia—
No word can be uttered
Without a great oath.
And near to the tavern
Is quite a commotion ;

Some wheels get entangled
And terrified horses
Rush off without drivers.
Here children are crying,
And sad wives and mothers
Are anxiously waiting;
And is the task easy
Of getting the peasant
Away from his drink?

Just near to the sign-post
A voice that's familiar
Is heard by the peasants;
They see there the Barin
(The same that helped Vavil,
And bought him the boots
To take home to his grandchild).
He chats with the men.
The peasants all open
Their hearts to the Barin;
If some song should please him
They'll sing it through five times;
"Just write the song down, sir!"
If some saying strike him;
"Take note of the words!"
And when he has written
Enough, he says quietly,
"The peasants are clever,
But one thing is bad:
They drink till they're helpless
And lie about tipsy,
It's painful to see."

They listen in silence.
The Barin commences

To write something down
In the little black note-book
When, all of a sudden,
A small, tipsy peasant,
Who up to that moment
Has lain on his stomach
And gazed at the speaker,
Springs up straight before him
And snatches his pencil
Right out of his hand :
" Wait, wait ! " cries the fellow,
" Stop writing your stories,
Dishonest and heartless,
About the poor peasant.
Say, what's your complaint ?
That sometimes the heart
Of the peasant rejoices ?
At times we drink hard,
But we work ten times harder ;
Among us are drunkards,
But many more sober.
Go, take through a village
A pailful of vodka ;
Go into the huts—
In one, in another,
They'll swallow it gladly.
But go to a third
And you'll find they won't touch it !
One family drinks,
While another drinks nothing,
Drinks nothing—and suffers
As much as the drunkards :
They, wisely or foolishly,
Follow their conscience ;
And see how misfortune,

The peasants' misfortune,
Will swallow that household
Hard-working and sober!
Pray, have you seen ever
The time of the harvest
In some Russian village?
Well, where were the people?
At work in the tavern?
Our fields may be broad,
But they don't give too freely.
Who robes them in spring-time,
And strips them in autumn?
You've met with a peasant
At nightfall, perchance,
When the work has been finished?
He's piled up great mountains
Of corn in the meadows,
He'll sup off a pea!
Hey, you mighty monster!
You builder of mountains,
I'll knock you flat down
With the stroke of a feather!

"Sweet food is the peasant's!
But stomachs aren't mirrors,
And so we don't whimper
To see what we've eaten.

"We work single-handed,
But when we have finished
Three partners [1] are waiting
To share in the profits;
A fourth [2] one there is, too,
Who eats like a Tartar—

[1] The tax collector, the landlord, and the priest.
[2] Fire.

Leaves nothing behind.
  The other day, only,
A mean little fellow
  Like you, came from Moscow
And clung to our backs.
  ' Oh, please sing him folk-songs '
And ' tell him some proverbs,'
  ' Some riddles and rhymes.'
And then came another
  To put us his questions :
How much do we work for ?
  How much and how little
We stuff in our bellies ?
  To count all the people
That live in the village
  Upon his five fingers.
He did not *ask how much*
  The fire feeds the wind with
Of peasants' hard work.
  Our drunkenness, maybe,
Can never be measured,
  But look at our labour—
Can that then be measured ?
  Our cares or our woes ?

" The vodka prostrates us ;
  But does not our labour,
Our trouble, prostrate us ?
  The peasant won't grumble
At each of his burdens,
  He'll set out to meet it,
And struggle to bear it ;
  The peasant does not flinch
At life-wasting labour,
  And tremble for fear

That his health may be injured.
Then why should he number
Each cupful of vodka
For fear that an odd one
May topple him over?
You say that it's painful
To see him lie tipsy?—
Then go to the bog;
You'll see how the peasant
Is squeezing the corn out,
Is wading and crawling
Where no horse or rider,
No man, though unloaded,
Would venture to tread.
You'll see how the army
Of profligate peasants
Is toiling in danger,
Is springing from one clod
Of earth to another,
Is pushing through bog-slime
With backs nearly breaking!
The sun's beating down
On the peasants' bare heads,
They are sweating and covered
With mud to the eyebrows,
Their limbs torn and bleeding
By sharp, prickly bog-grass!

"Does this picture please you?
You say that you suffer;
At least suffer wisely.
Don't use for a peasant
A gentleman's judgement;
We are not white-handed
And tender-skinned creatures,

But men rough and lusty
In work and in play.

"The heart of each peasant
Is black as a storm-cloud,
Its thunder should peal
And its blood rain in torrents;
But all ends in drink—
For after one cupful
The soul of the peasant
Is kindly and smiling;
But don't let that hurt you!
Look round and be joyful!
Hey, fellows! Hey, maidens!
You know how to foot it!
Their bones may be aching,
Their limbs have grown weary,
But youth's joy and daring
Is not quite extinguished,
It lives in them yet!"

The peasant is standing
On top of a hillock,
And stamping his feet,
And after being silent
A moment, and gazing
With glee at the masses
Of holiday people,
He roars to them hoarsely.

"Hey you, peasant kingdom!
You, hatless and drunken!
More racket! More noise!"
"Come, what's your name, uncle?"
"To write in the note-book?

Why not ? Write it down :
  ' In Barefoot the village
Lives old Jacob Naked,
  He'll work till he's taken,
He drinks till he's crazed.' "
  The peasants are laughing,
And telling the Barin
  The old fellow's story :
How shabby old Jacob
  Had lived once in Peter,[1]
And got into prison
  Because he bethought him
To get him to law
  With a very rich merchant ;
How after the prison
  He'd come back amongst them
All stripped, like a linden,
  And taken to ploughing.
For thirty years since
  On his narrow allotment
He'd worked in all weathers,
  The harrow his shelter
From sunshine and storm.
  He lived with the sokha,[2]
And when God would take him
  He'd drop from beneath it
Just like a black clod.

  An accident happened
One year to old Jacob :
  He bought some small pictures
To hang in the cottage
  For his little son ;

[1] Popular name for Petrograd.
[2] The primitive wooden plough still used by the peasants in Russia.

The old man himself, too,
Was fond of the pictures.
God's curse had then fallen;
The village was burnt,
And the old fellow's money,
The fruit of a life-time
(Some thirty-five roubles),[1]
Was lost in the flames.
He ought to have saved it,
But, to his misfortune,
He thought of the pictures
And seized them instead.
His wife in the meantime
Was saving the icons.[2]
And so, when the cottage
Fell in, all the roubles
Were melted together
In one lump of silver.
Old Jacob was offered
Eleven such roubles
For that silver lump.

"O old brother Jacob,
You paid for them dearly,
The little chap's pictures!
I warrant you've hung them
Again in the new hut."

"I've hung them—and more,"
He replied, and was silent.

The Barin was looking,
Examining Jacob,

[1] Three pounds. [2] Holy pictures of the saints.

The toiler, the earth-worm,
His chest thin and meagre,
His stomach as shrunk
As though something had crushed it,
His eyes and mouth circled
By numberless wrinkles,
Like drought-shrivelled earth.
And he altogether
Resembled the earth,
Thought the Barin, while noting
His throat, like a dry lump
Of clay, brown and hardened;
His brick-coloured face;
His hands—black and horny,
Like bark on the tree-trunk;
His hair—stiff and sandy. . . .

The peasants, remarking
That old Jacob's speech
Had not angered the Barin,
Themselves took his words up:
"Yes, yes, he speaks truly,
We must drink, it saves us,
It makes us feel strong.
Why, if we did not drink
Black gloom would engulf us.
If work does not kill us
Or trouble destroy us,
We shan't die from drink!"

"That's so. Is it not, sir?"

"Yes, God will protect us!"

"Come, drink with us, Barin!"

They go to buy vodka

And drink it together.
To Jacob the Barin
Has offered two cups.
"Ah, Barin," says Jacob,
"I see you're not angry.
A wise little head, yours,
And how could a wise head
Judge falsely of peasants?
Why, only the pig
Glues his nose to the garbage
And never sees Heaven!"

Then suddenly singing
Is heard in a chorus
Harmonious and bold.
A row of young fellows,
Half drunk, but not falling,
Come staggering onwards,
All lustily singing;
They sing of the Volga,
The daring of youths
And the beauty of maidens . . .
A hush falls all over
The road, and it listens;
And only the singing
Is heard, broadly rolling
In waves, sweet and tuneful,
Like wind-ruffled corn.
The hearts of the peasants
Are touched with wild anguish,
And one little woman
Grows pensive and mournful,
And then begins weeping
And sobs forth her grief:
"My life is like day-time

With no sun to warm it!
  My life is like night
With no glimmer of moon!
  And I—the young woman—
  Am like the swift steed
On the curb, like the swallow
  With wings crushed and broken;
My jealous old husband
  Is drunken and snoring,
But even while snoring
  He keeps one eye open,
And watches me always,
  Me—poor little wife!"

  And so she lamented,
The sad little woman;
  Then all of a sudden
Springs down from the waggon!
  "Where now?" cries her husband,
The jealous old man.
  And just as one lifts
By the tail a plump radish,
  He clutches her pig-tail,
And pulls her towards him.

  O night wild and drunken,
Not bright—and yet star-lit,
  Not hot—but fanned softly
By tender spring breezes,
  You've not left our peasants
  Untouched by your sweetness;
They're thinking and longing
  For their little women.
And they are quite right too;
  Still sweeter 'twould be
With a nice little wife!

Cries Ívan, " I love you,"
And Mariushka, " I you ! "
Cries Ívan, " Press closer ! "
And Mariushka, " Kiss me ! "
Cries Ívan, " The night's cold,"
And Mariushka, " Warm me ! "

They think of this song now,
And all make their minds up
To shorten the journey.

A birch-tree is growing
Alone by the roadside,
God knows why so lonely !
And under it spreading
The magic white napkin,
The peasants sit round it :

" Hey ! Napkin enchanted !
Give food to the peasants ! "
Two hands have come floating
From no one sees where,
Place a bucket of vodka,
A large pile of bread,
On the magic white napkin,
And dwindle away.

The peasants feel strengthened,
And leaving Román there
On guard near the vodka,
They mix with the people,
To try to discover
The one who is happy.

They're all in a hurry
To turn towards home.

CHAPTER IV

THE HAPPY ONES

In crowds gay and noisy
Our peasants are mixing,
Proclaiming their mission :
" Let any man here
Who esteems himself happy
Stand forth ! If he prove it
A pailful of vodka
Is at his disposal ;
As much as he wishes
So much he shall have ! "

This fabulous promise
Sets sober folk smiling ;
The tipsy and wise ones
Are ready to spit
In the beards of the pushing
Impertinent strangers !
But many are willing
To drink without payment,
And so when our peasants
Go back to the birch-tree
A crowd presses round them.
The first to come forward,
A lean discharged deacon,
With legs like two matches,
Lets forth a great mouthful
Of indistinct maxims :
That happiness lies not
In broad lands, in jewels,
In gold, and in sables—

" In what, then ? "

A peaceful
And undisturbed conscience.
That all the dominions
Of land-owners, nobles,
And Tsars are but earthly
And limited treasures ;
But he who is godly
Has part in Christ's kingdom
Of boundless extent :
" When warm in the sun,
With a cupful of vodka,
I'm perfectly happy,
I ask nothing more ! "

" And who'll give you vodka ? "
" Why, you ! You have promised."

" Be off, you lean scamp ! "

A one-eyed old woman
Comes next, bent and pock-marked.
And bowing before them
She says she is happy ;
That in her allotment
A thousand fine turnips
Have grown, this last autumn.
" Such turnips, I tell you !
Such monsters ! and tasty !
In such a small plot, too,
In length only one yard,
And three yards in width ! "

They laugh at the woman,
But give her no vodka ;

" Go, get you home, Mother !
You've vodka enough there
To flavour the turnips ! "

A soldier with medals,
Quite drunk but still thirsty,
Says firmly, " I'm happy ! "

" Then tell us, old fellow,
In what he is happy—
The soldier ? Take care, though,
To keep nothing back ! "

" Well, firstly, I've been
Through at least twenty battles,
And yet I'm alive.
And, secondly, mark you
(It's far more important),
In times of peace, too,
Though I'm always half-famished,
Death never has conquered !
And, third, though they flogged me
For every offence,
Great or small, I've survived it ! "

" Here, drink, little soldier !
With you one can't argue ;
You're happy indeed ! "

Then comes a young mason,
A huge, weighty hammer
Swung over his shoulder ;
" I live in content,"
He declares, " with my wife
And beloved old mother ;
We've nought to complain of."

" In what are you happy ? "
" In this ! "—like a feather
He swings the great hammer.
" Beginning at sunrise
And setting my back straight
As midnight draws near,
I can shatter a mountain !
Before now, it's happened
That, working one day,
I've piled enough stones up
To earn my five roubles ! "

Pakhóm tries to lift it—
The " happiness." After
Prodigiously straining
And cracking all over,
He sets it down, gladly,
And pours out some vodka.

" Well, weighty it is, man !
But will you be able
To bear in old age
Such a ' happiness,' think you ? "

" Don't boast of your strength ! "
Gasped a wheezing old peasant,
Half stifled with asthma.
(His nose pinched and shrivelled
Like that of a dead man,
His eyes bright and sunken,
His hands like a rake—
Stiffened, scraggy, and bony,
His legs long and narrow
Like spokes of a wheel,
A human mosquito.)

" I was not a worse man
Than he, the young mason,
And boasted of *my* strength.
God punished me for it!
The manager knew
I was simple—the villain!
He flattered and praised me.
I was but a youngster,
And pleased at his notice
I laboured like four men.
One day I had mounted
Some bricks to my shoulder,
When, just then, the devil
Must bring him in sight.

" ' What's that! ' he said laughing.
' 'Tis surely not Trifon
With such a light burden?
Ho, does it not shame
Such a strapping young fellow? '
' Then put some more bricks on,
I'll carry them, master,'
Said I, sore offended.
For full half an hour
I stood while he piled them,
He piled them—the dog!
I felt my back breaking,
But would not give way,
And that devilish burden
I carried right up
To the high second story!
He stood and looked on,
He himself was astounded,
And cried from beneath me:
' Well done, my brave fellow!

You don't know yourself, man,
What you have been doing!
It's forty stone, Trifon,
You've carried up there!'

"I *did* know; my heart
Struck my breast like a hammer,
The blood stood in circles
Round both of my eyeballs;
My back felt disjointed,
My legs weak and trembling . . .
'Twas then that I withered.
Come, treat me, my friends!"

"But why should we treat you?
In what are you happy?
In what you have told us?"

"No, listen—that's coming,
It's this: I have also,
Like each of us peasants,
Besought God to let me
Return to the village
To die. And when coming
From Petersburg, after
The illness I suffered
Through what I have told you,
Exhausted and weakened,
Half-dazed, half-unconscious,
I got to the station.
And all in the carriage
Were workmen, as I was,
And ill of the fever;
And all yearned for one thing:
To reach their own homes

Before death overcame them.
'Twas then I was lucky ;
The heat then was stifling,
And so many sick heads
Made Hell of the waggon.
Here one man was groaning,
There, rolling all over
The floor, like a lunatic,
Shouting and raving
Of wife or of mother.
And many such fellows
Were put out and left
At the stations we came to.
I looked at them, thinking,
Shall I be left too ?
I was burning and shaking,
The blood began starting
All over my eyeballs,
And I, in my fever,
Half-waking, was dreaming
Of cutting of cocks' throats
(We once were cock-farmers,
And one year it happened
We fattened a thousand).
They came to my thoughts, now,
The damnable creatures,
I tried to start praying,
But no !—it was useless.
And, would you believe me ?
I saw the whole party
In that hellish waggon
Come quivering round me,
Their throats cut, and spurting
With blood, and still crowing,
And I, with the knife, shrieked :

'Enough of your noise!'
And yet, by God's mercy,
Made no sound at all.
I sat there and struggled
To keep myself silent.
At last the day ended,
And with it the journey,
And God had had pity
Upon His poor orphan;
I crawled to the village.
And now, by His mercy,
I'm better again."

"Is that what you boast of—
Your happiness, peasant?"
Exclaims an old lackey
With legs weak and gouty.
"Treat me, little brothers,
I'm happy, God sees it!
For I was the chief serf
Of Prince Pereméteff,
A rich prince, and mighty,
My wife, the most favoured
By him, of the women;
My daughter, together
With his, the young lady,
Was taught foreign languages,
French and some others;
And she was permitted
To *sit*, and not stand,
In her mistress's presence.
Good Lord! How it bites!"
(He stoops down to rub it,
The gouty right knee-cap.)
The peasants laugh loudly!

" What laugh you at, stupids ? "
He cries, getting angry,
" I'm ill, I thank God,
And at waking and sleeping
I pray, ' Leave me ever
My honoured complaint, Lord !
For that makes me noble ! '
I've none of your low things,
Your peasants' diseases,
My illness is lofty,
And only acquired
By the most elevated,
The first in the Empire ;
I suffer, you villains,
From gout, gout its name is !
It's only brought on
By the drinking of claret,
Of Burgundy, champagne,
Hungarian syrup,
By thirty years' drinking !
For forty years, peasants,
I've stood up behind it—
The chair of His Highness,
The Prince Peremèteff,
And swallowed the leavings
In plates and in glasses,
The finest French truffles,
The dregs of the liquors.
Come, treat me, you peasants ! "

" Excuse us, your Lordship,
Our wine is but simple,
The drink of the peasants !
It wouldn't suit *you* ! "

A bent, yellow-haired man
Steals up to the peasants,
A man from White Russia.
He yearns for the vodka.
"Oh, give me a taste!"
He implores, "I am happy!"

"But wait! You must tell us
In what you are happy."

"In bread I am happy;
At home, in White Russia,
The bread is of barley,
All gritty and weedy.
At times, I can tell you,
I've howled out aloud,
Like a woman in labour,
With pains in my stomach!
But now, by God's mercy,
I work for Gubónine,
And there they give rye-bread,
I'm happy in that."

A dark-looking peasant,
With jaw turned and twisted,
Which makes him look sideways,
Says next, "I am happy.
A bear-hunter I am,
And six of my comrades
Were killed by old Mishka;[1]
On me God has mercy."

"Look round to the left side."

[1] The Russian nickname for the bear.

He tries to, but cannot,
For all his grimaces !

" A bear knocked my jaw round,
A savage young female."

" Go, look for another,
And give her the left cheek,
She'll soon put it straight ! "

They laugh, but, however,
They give him some vodka.
Some ragged old beggars
Come up to the peasants,
Drawn near by the smell
Of the froth on the vodka ;
They say they are happy.

" Why, right on his threshold
The shopman will meet us !
We go to a house-door,
From there they conduct us
Right back to the gate !
When we begin singing
The housewife runs quickly
And brings to the window
A loaf and a knife.
And then we sing loudly,
' Oh, give us the whole loaf,
It cannot be cut
And it cannot be crumbled,
For you it is quicker,
For us it is better ! ' "

The peasants observe
That their vodka is wasted,
The pail's nearly empty.
They say to the people,
" Enough of your chatter,
You, shabby and ragged,
You, humpbacked and corny,
Go, get you all home ! "

" In your place, good strangers,"
The peasant, Fedócy,
From " Swallow-Smoke " village,
Said, sitting beside them,
" I'd ask Érmil Gírin.
If he will not suit you,
If he is not happy,
Then no one can help you."

" But who is this Érmil,
A noble—a prince ? "

" No prince—not a noble,
But simply a peasant."

" Well, tell us about him."

" I'll tell you ; he rented
The mill of an orphan,
Until the Court settled
To sell it at auction.
Then Érmil, with others,
Went into the sale-room.
The small buyers quickly
Dropped out of the bidding ;
Till Érmil alone,
With a merchant, Altérnikoff,
Kept up the fight.

The merchant outbid him,
  Each time by a farthing,
Till Érmil grew angry
  And added five roubles;
The merchant a farthing
  And Érmil a rouble.
The merchant gave in then,
  When suddenly something
Unlooked for occurred:
  The sellers demanded
A third of the money
  Paid down on the spot;
'Twas one thousand roubles,
  And Érmil had not brought
So much money with him;
  'Twas either his error,
Or else they deceived him.
  The merchant said gaily,
'The mill comes to me, then?'
  'Not so,' replied Érmil;
He went to the sellers;
  'Good sirs, will you wait
Thirty minutes?' he asked.

"'But how will that help you?'
'I'll bring you the money.'

"'But where will you find it?
You're out of your senses!
  It's thirty-five versts
To the mill; in an hour now
  The sales will be finished.'

"'You'll wait half an hour, sirs?'
'An hour, if you wish.'

Then Érmil departed,
The sellers exchanging
Sly looks with the merchant,
And grinning—the foxes!
But Érmil went out
And made haste to the market-place
Crowded with people
('Twas market-day, then),
And he mounted a waggon,
And there he stood crossing
Himself, and low bowing
In all four directions.
He cried to the people,
'Be silent a moment,
I've something to ask you!'
The place became still
And he told them the story:

"'Since long has the merchant
Been wooing the mill,
But I'm not such a dullard.
Five times have I been here
To ask if there *would* be
A second day's bidding,
They answered, "There will."
You know that the peasant
Won't carry his money
All over the by-ways
Without a good reason,
So I have none with me;
And look—now they tell me
There's no second bidding
And ask for the money!
The cunning ones tricked me
And laughed—the base heathens!

And said to me sneering :
" But, what can you do
In an hour ? Where find money ? "

" ' They're crafty and strong,
But the people are stronger !
The merchant is rich—
But the people are richer !
Hey ! What is *his* worth
To *their* treasury, think you ?
Like fish in the ocean
The wealth of the people ;
You'll draw it and draw it—
But not see its end !
Now, brother, God hears me,
Come, give me this money !
Next Friday I'll pay you
The very last farthing.
It's not that I care
For the mill—it's the insult !
Whoever knows Érmil,
Whoever believes him,
Will give what he can.'

" A miracle happened ;
The coat of each peasant
Flew up on the left
As though blown by a wind !
The peasants are bringing
Their money to Érmil,
Each gives what he can.
Though Érmil's well lettered
He writes nothing down ;
It's well he can count it
So great is his hurry.

They gather his hat full
Of all kinds of money,
From farthings to bank-notes,
The notes of the peasant
All crumpled and torn.
He has the whole sum now,
But still the good people
Are bringing him more.

"'Here, take this, too, Érmil,
You'll pay it back later!'

"He bows to the people
In all four directions,
Gets down from the waggon,
And pressing the hat
Full of money against him,
Runs back to the sale-room
As fast as he can.

"The sellers are speechless
And stare in amazement,
The merchant turns green
As the money is counted
And laid on the table.

"The sellers come round him
All craftily praising
His excellent bargain.
But Érmil sees through them;
He gives not a farthing,
He speaks not a word.

"The whole town assembles
At market next Friday,
When Érmil is paying

His debt to the people.
How can he remember
To whom he must pay it?
No murmur arises,
No sound of discussion,
As each man tells quietly
The sum to be paid him.

"And Émril himself said,
That when it was finished
A rouble was lying
With no one to claim it;
And though till the evening
He went, with purse open,
Demanding the owner,
It still was unclaimed.
The sun was just setting
When Émril, the last one
To go from the market,
Assembled the beggars
And gave them the rouble." . . .

"'Tis strange!" say the peasants,
"By what kind of magic
Can one single peasant
Gain such a dominion
All over the country?"

"No magic he uses
Save truthfulness, brothers!
But say, have you ever
Heard tell of Prince Yurloff's
Estate, Adovshina?"

"We have. What about it?"
"The manager there

Was a Colonel, with stars,
Of the Corps of Gendarmes.
He had six or seven
Assistants beneath him,
And Érmil was chosen
As principal clerk.
He was but a boy, then,
Of nineteen or twenty;
And though 'tis no fine post,
The clerk's—to the peasants
The clerk is a great man;
To him they will go
For advice and with questions.
Though Érmil had power to,
He asked nothing from them;
And if they should offer
He never accepted.
(He bears a poor conscience,
The peasant who covets
The mite of his brother!)
Well, five years went by,
And they trusted in Érmil,
When all of a sudden
The master dismissed him
For sake of another.
And sadly they felt it.
The new clerk was grasping;
He moved not a finger
Unless it was paid for;
A letter—three farthings!
A question—five farthings!
Well, he was a pope's son
And God placed him rightly!
But still, by God's mercy,
He did not stay long:

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"The old Prince soon died,
And the young Prince was master.
He came and dismissed them—
The manager-colonel,
The clerk and assistants,
And summoned the peasants
To choose them an Elder.
They weren't long about it!
And eight thousand voices
Cried out, 'Érmil Gírin!'
As though they were one.
Then Érmil was sent for
To speak with the Barin,
And after some minutes
The Barin came out
On the balcony, standing
In face of the people;
He cried, 'Well, my brothers,
Your choice is elected
With my princely sanction!
But answer me this:
Don't you think he's too youthful?'

"'No, no, little Father!
He's young, but he's wise!'

"So Érmil was Elder,
For seven years ruled
In the Prince's dominion.
Not once in that time
Did a coin of the peasants
Come under his nail,
Did the innocent suffer,
The guilty escape him,
He followed his conscience."

" But stop ! " exclaimed hoarsely
A shrivelled grey pope,
Interrupting the speaker,
" The harrow went smoothly
Enough, till it happened
To strike on a stone,
Then it swerved of a sudden.
In telling a story
Don't leave an odd word out
And alter the rhythm !
Now, if you knew Érmil
You knew his young brother,
Knew Mítyenka, did you ? "

The speaker considered,
Then said, " I'd forgotten,
I'll tell you about it :
It happened that once
Even Érmil the peasant
Did wrong : his young brother,
Unjustly exempted
From serving his time,
On the day of recruiting ;
And we were all silent,
And how could we argue
When even the Barin
Himself would not order
The Elder's own brother
To unwilling service ?
And only one woman,
Old Vlásevna, shedding
Wild tears for her son,
Went bewailing and screaming :
' It wasn't our turn ! '
Well, of course she'd be certain

To scream for a time,
Then leave off and be silent.
But what happened then?
The recruiting was finished,
But Érmil had changed;
He was mournful and gloomy;
He ate not, he drank not,
Till one day his father
Went into the stable
And found him there holding
A rope in his hands.
Then at last he unbosomed
His heart to his father:
'Since Vlásevna's son
Has been sent to the service,
I'm weary of living,
I wish but to die!'
His brothers came also,
And they with the father
Besought him to hear them,
To listen to reason.
But he only answered:
'A villain I am,
And a criminal; bind me,
And bring me to justice!'
And they, fearing worse things,
Obeyed him and bound him.
The commune assembled,
Exclaiming and shouting;
They'd never been summoned
To witness or judge
Such peculiar proceedings.

"And Érmil's relations
Did not beg for mercy

And lenient treatment,
But rather for firmness:
'Bring Vlásevna's son back
Or Érmil will hang himself,
Nothing will save him!'
And then appeared Érmil
Himself, pale and bare-foot,
With ropes bound and handcuffed,
And bowing his head
He spoke low to the people:
'The time was when I was
Your judge; and I judged you,
In all things obeying
My conscience. But I now
Am guiltier far
Than were you. Be my judges!'
He bowed to our feet,
The demented one, sighing,
Then stood up and crossed himself,
Trembling all over;
It pained us to witness
How he, of a sudden,
Fell down on his knees there
At Vlásevna's feet.
Well, all was put right soon,
The nobles have fingers
In every small corner,
The lad was brought back
And young Mítyenka started;
They say that his service
Did not weigh too heavy,
The prince saw to that.
And we, as a penance,
Imposed upon Érmil
A fine, and to Vlásevna

One part was given,
To Mítya another,
The rest to the village
For vodka. However,
Not quickly did Érmil
Get over his sorrow :
He went like a lost one
For full a year after,
And—though the whole district
Implored him to keep it—
He left his position.
He rented the mill, then,
And more than of old
Was beloved by the people.
He took for his grinding
No more than was honest,
His customers never
Kept waiting a moment,
And all men alike :
The rich landlord, the workman,
The master and servant,
The poorest of peasants
Were served as their turn came ;
Strict order he kept.
Myself, I have not been
Since long in that district,
But often the people
Have told me about him,
And never could praise him
Enough. So in your place
I'd go and ask Érmil."

" Your time would be wasted,"
The grey-headed pope,
Who'd before interrupted,

Remarked to the peasants,
" I knew Érmil Gírin,
I chanced in that district
Some five years ago.
I have often been shifted,
Our bishop loved vastly
To keep us all moving,
So I was his neighbour.
Yes, he was a peasant
Unique, I bear witness,
And all things he owned
That can make a man happy :
Peace, riches, and honour,
And that kind of honour
Most valued and precious,
Which cannot be purchased
By might or by money,
But only by righteousness,
Wisdom and kindness.
But still, I repeat it,
Your time will be wasted
In going to Érmil :
In prison he lies."

" How's that ? "

" God so willed it.
You've heard how the peasants
Of ' Log ' the Pomyéshchick
Of Province ' Affrighted,'
Of District ' Scarce-Breathing,'
Of village ' Dumbfounded,'
Revolted ' for causes
Entirely unknown,'
As they say in the papers.

(I once used to read them.)
And so, too, in this case,
The local Ispravnik,[1]
The Tsar's high officials,
And even the peasants,
'Dumbfounded' themselves,
Never fathomed the reason
Of all the disturbance.
But things became bad,
And the soldiers were sent for,
The Tsar packed a messenger
Off in a hurry
To speak to the people.
His epaulettes rose
To his ears as he coaxed them
And cursed them together.
But curses they're used to,
And coaxing was lost,
For they don't understand it:
'Brave orthodox peasants!'
'The Tsar—Little Father!'
'Our dear Mother Russia!'
He bellowed and shouted
Until he was hoarse,
While the peasants stood round him
And listened in wonder.

"But when he was tired
Of these peaceable measures
Of calming the riots,
At length he decided
On giving the order
Of 'Fire' to the soldiers;
When all of a sudden

[1] Chief of police.

A bright thought occurred
To the clerk of the Volost : [1]
' The people trust Gírin,
The people will hear him ! '

" ' Then let him be brought ! ' " [2]
* * * * *

A cry has arisen
" Have mercy ! Have mercy ! "
A check to the story ;
They hurry off quickly
To see what has happened ;
And there on a bank
Of a ditch near the roadside,
Some peasants are birching
A drunken old lackey,
Just taken in thieving.
A court had been summoned,
The judges deciding
To birch the offender,
That each of the jury
(About three and twenty)
Should give him a stroke
Turn in turn of the rod. . . .

The lackey was up
And made off, in a twinkling,
He took to his heels
Without stopping to argue,
On two scraggy legs.

" How he trips it—the dandy ! "
The peasants cry, laughing ;

[1] An administrative unit consisting of a group of villages.

[2] The end of the story is omitted because of the interference of the Censor.

They've soon recognized him ;
The boaster who prated
So much of his illness
From drinking strange liquors.

" Ho ! where has it gone to,
Your noble complaint ?
Look how nimble he's getting ! "

" Well, well, Little Father,
Now finish the story ! "

" It's time to go home now,
My children,—God willing,
We'll meet again some day
And finish it then. . . ."

The people disperse
As the dawn is approaching.
Our peasants begin
To bethink them of sleeping,
When all of a sudden
A " troika "[1] comes flying
From no one sees where,
With its silver bells ringing.
Within it is sitting
A plump little Barin,
His little mouth smoking
A little cigar.
The peasants draw up
In a line on the roadway,
Thus barring the passage
In front of the horses ;
And, standing bareheaded,
Bow low to the Barin.

[1] A three-horsed carriage.

CHAPTER V

THE POMYÉSHCHICK

The "troika" is drawing
The local Pomyéshchick—
Gavríl Afanásich
Obólt-Oboldoóeff.
A portly Pomyéshchick,
With long grey moustaches,
Some sixty years old.
His bearing is stately,
His cheeks very rosy,
He wears a short top-coat,
Tight-fitting and braided,
Hungarian fashion;
And very wide trousers.
Gavríl Afanásich
Was probably startled
At seeing the peasants
Unflinchingly barring
The way to his horses;
He promptly produces
A loaded revolver
As bulky and round
As himself; and directs it
Upon the intruders:

"You brigands! You cut-throats!
Don't move, or I shoot!"

"How can we be brigands?"
The peasants say, laughing,
"No knives and no pitchforks,
No hatchets have we!"

" Who are you ? And what
Do you want ? " said the Barin.

" A trouble torments us,
It draws us away
From our wives, from our children,
Away from our work,
Kills our appetites too.
Do give us your promise
To answer us truly,
Consulting your conscience
And searching your knowledge,
Not sneering, nor feigning
The question we put you,
And then we will tell you
The cause of our trouble."

" I promise. I give you
The oath of a noble."

" No, don't give us that—
Not the oath of a noble !
We're better content
With the word of a Christian.
The nobleman's oaths—
They are given with curses,
With kicks and with blows !
We are better without them ! "

" Eh-heh, that's a new creed !
Well, let it be so, then.
And what is your trouble ? "

" But put up the pistol !
That's right ! Now we'll tell you :

We are not assassins,
But peaceable peasants,
From Government 'Hard-pressed,'
From District 'Most Wretched,'
From 'Destitute' Parish,
From neighbouring hamlets,—
'Patched,' 'Bare-Foot,' and 'Shabby,'
'Bleak,' 'Burnt-out,' and 'Hungry.'
From 'Harvestless,' too.
We met in the roadway,
And one asked another,
Who is he—the man
Free and happy in Russia?
Luká said, 'The pope,'
And Roman, 'The Pomyéshchick,'
Demyán, 'The official.'
'The round-bellied merchant,'
Said both brothers Goóbin,
Mitródor and Ívan;
Pakhóm said, 'His Highness,
The Tsar's Chief Adviser,'
And Prov said, 'The Tsar.'

"Like bulls are the peasants;
Once folly is in them
You cannot dislodge it,
Although you should beat them
With stout wooden cudgels,
They stick to their folly,
And nothing can move them!
We argued and argued,
While arguing quarrelled,
While quarrelling fought,
Till at last we decided
That never again

Would we turn our steps homeward
To kiss wives and children,
To see the old people,
Until we have settled
The subject of discord;
Until we have found
The reply to our question—
Of who can, in Russia,
Be happy and free?

"Now tell us, Pomyéshchick,
Is your life a sweet one?
And is the Pomyéshchick
Both happy and free?"

Gavríl Afanásich
Springs out of the "troika"
And comes to the peasants.
He takes—like a doctor—
The hand of each one,
And carefully feeling
The pulse gazes searchingly
Into their faces,
Then clasps his plump sides
And stands shaking with laughter.
The clear, hearty laugh
Of the healthy Pomyéshchick
Peals out in the pleasant
Cool air of the morning:
"Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha!"
Till he stops from exhaustion.
And then he addresses
The wondering peasants:
"Put on your hats, *gentlemen*,
Please to be seated!"

(He speaks with a bitter [1]
And mocking politeness.)

"But we are not gentry;
We'd rather stand up
In your presence, your worship."

"Sit down, worthy *citizens*,
Here on the bank."

The peasants protest,
But, on seeing it useless,
Sit down on the bank.

"May I sit beside you?
Hey, Proshka! Some sherry,
My rug and a cushion!"
He sits on the rug.
Having finished the sherry,
Thus speaks the Pomyéshchick:

"I gave you my promise
To answer your question. . . .
The task is not easy,
For though you are highly
Respectable people,
You're not very learned.
Well, firstly, I'll try
To explain you the meaning
Of Lord, or Pomyéshchick.
Have you, by some chance,
Ever heard the expression

[1] The Pomyéshchick is still bitter because his serfs have been set free by the Government.

The ' Family Tree ' ?
Do you know what it means ? "

" The woods are not closed to us.
We have seen all kinds
Of trees," say the peasants.
" Your shot has miscarried !
I'll try to speak clearly ;
I come of an ancient,
Illustrious family ;
One, Oboldoóeff,
My ancestor, is
Amongst those who were mentioned
In old Russian chronicles
Written for certain
Two hundred and fifty
Years back. It is written,
' 'Twas given the Tartar,
Obólt-Oboldoóeff,
A piece of cloth, value
Two roubles, for having
Amused the Tsaritsa
Upon the Tsar's birthday
By fights of wild beasts,
Wolves and foxes. He also
Permitted his own bear
To fight with a wild one,
Which mauled Oboldoóeff,
And hurt him severely.'
And now, gentle peasants,
Did you understand ? "

" Why not ? To this day
One can see them—the loafers
Who stroll about leading
A bear ! "

" Be it so, then !
But now, please be silent,
And hark to what follows :
From this Oboldoóeff
My family sprang ;
And this incident happened
Two hundred and fifty
Years back, as I told you,
But still, on my mother's side,
Even more ancient
The family is :
Says another old writing :
' Prince Schépin, and one
Vaska Goóseff, attempted
To burn down the city
Of Moscow. They wanted
To plunder the Treasury.
They were beheaded.'
And this was, good peasants,
Full three hundred years back !
From these roots it was
That our Family Tree sprang."

" And you are the . . . as one
Might say . . . little apple
Which hangs on a branch
Of the tree," say the peasants.

" Well, apple, then, call it,
So long as it please you.
At least you appear
To have got at my meaning.
And now, you yourselves
Understand—the more ancient
A family is

The more noble its members.
Is that so, good peasants ? "

" That's so," say the peasants.
" The black bone and white bone
Are different, and they must
Be differently honoured."

" Exactly. I see, friends,
You quite understand me."
The Barin continued :
" In past times we lived,
As they say, ' in the bosom
Of Christ,' and we knew
What it meant to be honoured !
Not only the people
Obeyed and revered us,
But even the earth
And the waters of Russia. . . .
You knew what it was
To be One, in the centre
Of vast, spreading lands,
Like the sun in the heavens :
The clustering villages
Yours, yours the meadows,
And yours the black depths
Of the great virgin forests !
You pass through a village ;
The people will meet you,
Will fall at your feet ;
Or you stroll in the forest ;
The mighty old trees
Bend their branches before you.
Through meadows you saunter :
The slim golden corn-stems

Rejoicing, will curtsey
With winning caresses,
Will hail you as Master.
The little fish sports
In the cool little river;
Get fat, little fish,
At the will of the Master!
The little hare speeds
Through the green little meadow;
Speed, speed, little hare,
Till the coming of autumn,
The season of hunting,
The sport of the Master.
And all things exist
But to gladden the Master.
Each wee blade of grass
Whispers lovingly to him,
'I live but for thee. . . .'

"The joy and the beauty,
The pride of all Russia—
The Lord's holy churches—
Which brighten the hill-sides
And gleam like great jewels
On the slopes of the valleys,
Were rivalled by one thing
In glory, and that
Was the nobleman's manor.
Adjoining the manor
Were glass-houses sparkling,
And bright Chinese arbours,
While parks spread around it.
On each of the buildings
Gay banners displaying
Their radiant colours,

And beckoning softly,
  Invited the guest
To partake of the pleasures
  Of rich hospitality.
Never did Frenchmen
  In dreams even picture
Such sumptuous revels
  As we used to hold.
Not only for one day,
  Or two, did they last—
But for whole months together!
  We fattened great turkeys,
  We brewed our own liquors,
We kept our own actors,
  And troupes of musicians,
And legions of servants!
  Why, I kept five cooks,
Besides pastry-cooks, working,
Two blacksmiths, three carpenters,
  Eighteen musicians,
And twenty-two huntsmen. . . .
  My God! . . ."

The afflicted
Pomyéshchick broke down here,
  And hastened to bury
His face in the cushion. . . .
  "Hey, Proshka!" he cried,
And then quickly the lackey
  Poured out and presented
A glassful of brandy.
  The glass was soon empty,
And when the Pomyéshchick
  Had rested awhile,
He again began speaking:

" Ah, then, Mother Russia,
How gladly in autumn
  Your forests awoke
To the horn of the huntsman!
  Their dark, gloomy depths,
Which had saddened and faded,
  Were pierced by the clear
Ringing blast, and they listened,
  Revived and rejoiced,
To the laugh of the echo.
  The hounds and the huntsmen
Are gathered together,
  And wait on the skirts
Of the forest; and with them
  The Master; and farther
Within the deep forest
  The dog-keepers, roaring
And shouting like madmen,
  The hounds all a-bubble
Like fast-boiling water.
  Hark! There's the horn calling!
You hear the pack yelling?
  They're crowding together!
And where's the red beast?
Hoo-loo-loo! Hoo-loo-loo!
  And the sly fox is ready;
Fat, furry old Reynard
  Is flying before us,
His bushy tail waving!
The knowing hounds crouch,
  And each lithe body quivers,
Suppressing the fire
  That is blazing within it:
'Dear guests of our hearts,
  Do come nearer and greet us,

We're panting to meet you,
We, hale little fellows!
Come nearer to us
And away from the bushes!'

"They're off! Now, my horse,
Let your swiftness not fail me!
My hounds, you are staunch
And you will not betray me!
Hoo-loo! Faster, faster!
Now, *at him*, my children! . . ."
Gavríl Afanásich
Springs up, wildly shouting,
His arms waving madly,
He dances around them!
He's certainly after
A fox in the forest!

The peasants observe him
In silent enjoyment,
They smile in their beards. . . .

"Eh . . . you, mad, merry hunters!
Although he forgets
Many things—the Pomyéshchick—
Those hunts in the autumn
Will not be forgotten.
'Tis not for our own loss
We grieve, Mother Russia,
But you that we pity;
For you, with the hunting
Have lost the last traces
Of days bold and warlike
That made you majestic. . . .

"At times, in the autumn,
A party of fifty

Would start on a hunting tour ;
Then each Pomyéshchick
Brought with him a hundred
Fine dogs, and twelve keepers,
And cooks in abundance.
And after the cooks
Came a long line of waggons
Containing provisions.
And as we went forward
With music and singing,
You might have mistaken
Our band for a fine troop
Of cavalry, moving !
The time flew for us
Like a falcon." How lightly
The breast of the nobleman
Rose, while his spirit
Went back to the days
Of Old Russia, and greeted
The gallant Boyárin.[1] . . .

"No whim was denied us.
To whom I desire
I show mercy and favour ;
And whom I dislike
I strike dead on the spot.
The law is my wish,
And my fist is my hangman !
My blow makes the sparks crowd,
My blow smashes jaw-bones,
My blow scatters teeth ! . . ."

Like a string that is broken,
The voice of the nobleman
Suddenly ceases ;

[1] The Russian warriors of olden times.

He lowers his eyes
To the ground, darkly frowning . . .
And then, in a low voice,
He says :

" You yourselves know
That strictness is needful ;
But I, with love, punished.
The chain has been broken,
The links burst asunder ;
And though we do not beat
The peasant, no longer
We look now upon him
With fatherly feelings.
Yes, I was severe too
At times, but more often
I turned hearts towards me
With patience and mildness.

" Upon Easter Sunday
I kissed all the peasants
Within my domain.
A great table, loaded
With ' Paska ' and ' Koólich '[1]
And eggs of all colours,
Was spread in the manor.
My wife, my old mother,
My sons, too, and even
My daughters did not scorn
To kiss[2] the last peasant :
' Now Christ has arisen ! '
' Indeed He has risen ! '

[1] Russian Easter dishes.
[2] Russians embrace one another on Easter Sunday, recalling the resurrection of Christ.

The peasants broke fast then,
Drank vodka and wine.
Before each great holiday,
In my best staterooms
The All-Night Thanksgiving
Was held by the pope.
My serfs were invited
With every inducement :
'Pray hard now, my children,
Make use of the chance,
Though you crack all your foreheads!' [1]
The nose suffered somewhat,
But still at the finish
We brought all the women-folk
Out of a village
To scrub down the floors.
You see 'twas a cleansing
Of souls, and a strengthening
Of spiritual union ;
Now, isn't that so ? "

" That's so," say the peasants,
But each to himself thinks,
" They needed persuading
With sticks though, I warrant,
To get them to pray
In your Lordship's fine manor ! "

" I'll say, without boasting,
They loved me—my peasants.
In my large Surminsky
Estate, where the peasants
Were mostly odd-jobbers,

[1] The Russians press their foreheads to the ground while worshipping.

Or very small tradesmen,
It happened that they
Would get weary of staying
At home, and would ask
My permission to travel,
To visit strange parts
At the coming of spring.
They'd often be absent
Through summer and autumn.
My wife and the children
Would argue while guessing
The gifts that the peasants
Would bring on returning.
And really, besides
Lawful dues of the 'Barin'
In cloth, eggs, and live stock,
The peasants would gladly
Bring gifts to the family:
Jam, say, from Kiev,
From Astrakhan fish,
And the richer among them
Some silk for the lady.
You see!—as he kisses
Her hand he presents her
A neat little packet!
And then for the children
Are sweetmeats and toys;
For me, the old toper,
Is wine from St. Petersburg—
Mark you, the rascal
Won't go to the Russian
For that! He knows better—
He runs to the Frenchman!
And when we have finished
Admiring the presents

I go for a stroll
And a chat with the peasants ;
They talk with me freely.
My wife fills their glasses,
My little ones gather
Around us and listen,
While sucking their sweets,
To the tales of the peasants :
Of difficult trading,
Of places far distant,
Of Petersburg, Astrakhan,
Kazan, and Kiev. . . .
On such terms it was
That I lived with my peasants.
Now, wasn't that nice ? "

" Yes," answer the peasants ;
" Yes, well might one envy
The noble Pomyéshchick !
His life was so sweet
There was no need to leave it."

" And now it is past. . . .
It has vanished for ever !
Hark ! There's the bell tolling ! "

They listen in silence :
In truth, through the stillness
Which settles around them,
The slow, solemn sound
On the breeze of the morning
Is borne from Kusminsky. . . .

" Sweet peace to the peasant !
God greet him in Heaven ! "

The peasants say softly,
And cross themselves thrice;
And the mournful Pomyéshchick
Uncovers his head,
As he piously crosses
Himself, and he answers:
"'Tis not for the peasant
The knell is now tolling,
It tolls the lost life
Of the stricken Pomyéshchick.
Farewell to the past,
And farewell to thee, Russia,
The Russia who cradled
The happy Pomyéshchick,
Thy place has been stolen
And filled by another! . . .
Heh, Proshka!" (The brandy
Is given, and quickly
He empties the glass.)
"Oh, it isn't consoling
To witness the change
In thy face, oh, my Motherland!
Truly one fancies
The whole race of nobles
Has suddenly vanished!
Wherever one goes, now,
One falls over peasants
Who lie about, tipsy,
One meets not a creature
But excise official,
Or stupid 'Posrédnik,'[1]
Or Poles who've been banished.
One sees the troops passing,

[1] The official appointed to arrange terms between the Pomyéshchicks and their emancipated serfs.

And then one can guess
That a village has somewhere
Revolted, ' in thankful
And dutiful spirit. . . .'
In old days, these roads
Were made gay by the passing
Of carriage, ' dormeuse,'
And of six-in-hand coaches,
And pretty, light troikas ;
And in them were sitting
The family troop
Of the jolly Pomyéshchick :
The stout, buxom mother,
The fine, roguish sons,
And the pretty young daughters ;
One heard with enjoyment
The chiming of large bells,
The tinkling of small bells,
Which hung from the harness.
And now ? . . . What distraction
Has life ? And what joy
Does it bring the Pomyéshchick ?
At each step, you meet
Something new to revolt you ;
And when in the air
You can smell a rank graveyard,
You know you are passing
A nobleman's manor !
My Lord ! . . . They have pillaged
The beautiful dwelling !
They've pulled it all down,
Brick by brick, and have fashioned
The bricks into hideously
Accurate columns !
The broad shady park

Of the outraged Pomyéshchick,
The fruit of a hundred years'
Careful attention,
Is falling away
'Neath the axe of a peasant!
The peasant works gladly,
And greedily reckons
The number of logs
Which his labour will bring him.
His dark soul is closed
To refinement of feeling,
And what would it matter
To him, if you told him
That this stately oak
Which his hatchet is felling
My grandfather's hand
Had once planted and tended;
That under this ash-tree
My dear little children,
My Vera and Gánushka,
Echoed my voice
As they played by my side;
That under this linden
My young wife confessed me
That little Gavrióushka,
Our best-beloved first-born,
Lay under her heart,
As she nestled against me
And bashfully hid
Her sweet face in my bosom
As red as a cherry. . . .
It is to his profit
To ravish the park,
And his mission delights him.
It makes one ashamed now

To pass through a village ;
The peasant sits still
And he dreams not of bowing.
One feels in one's breast
Not the pride of a noble
But wrath and resentment.
The axe of the robber
Resounds in the forest,
It maddens your heart,
But you cannot prevent it,
For who can you summon
To rescue your forest ?
The fields are half-laboured,
The seeds are half-wasted,
No trace left of order. . . .
O Mother, my country,
We do not complain
For ourselves—of our sorrows,
Our hearts bleed for thee :
Like a widow thou standest
In helpless affliction
With tresses dishevelled
And grief-stricken face. . . .
They have blighted the forest,
The noisy low taverns
Have risen and flourished.
They've picked the most worthless
And loose of the people,
And given them power
In the posts of the Zemstvos ;
They've seized on the peasant
And taught him his letters—
Much good may it do him !
Your brow they have branded,
As felons are branded,

As cattle are branded,
With these words they've stamped it:
'To take away with you
Or drink on the premises.'
Was it worth while, pray,
To weary the peasant
With learning his letters
In order to read them?
The land that we keep
Is our mother no longer,
Our stepmother rather.
And then to improve things,
These pert good-for-nothings,
These impudent writers
Must needs shout in chorus:
'But whose fault, then, is it,
That you thus exhausted
And wasted your country?'
But I say—you duffers!
Who *could* foresee this?
They babble, 'Enough
Of your lordly pretensions!
It's time that you learnt something,
Lazy Pomyéshchicks!
Get up, now, and work!'

"Work! To whom, in God's name,
Do you think you are speaking?
I am not a peasant
In 'laputs,' good madman!
I am—by God's mercy—
A Noble of Russia.
You take us for Germans!
We nobles have tender
And delicate feelings,

Our pride is inborn,
And in Russia our classes
Are not taught to work.
Why, the meanest official
Will not raise a finger
To clear his own table,
Or light his own stove!
I can say, without boasting,
That though I have lived
Forty years in the country,
And scarcely have left it,
I could not distinguish
Between rye and barley.
And they sing of 'work' to me!

"If we Pomyéshchicks
Have really mistaken
Our duty and calling,
If really our mission
Is not, as in old days,
To keep up the hunting,
To revel in luxury,
Live on forced labour,
Why did they not tell us
Before? Could I learn it?
For what do I see?
I've worn the Tsar's livery,
'Sullied the Heavens,'
And 'squandered the treasury
Gained by the people,'
And fully imagined
To do so for ever,
And now . . . God in Heaven! . . ."
The Barin is sobbing! . . .

The kind-hearted peasants
Can hardly help crying
Themselves, and they think:
"Yes, the chain has been broken,
The strong links have snapped,
And the one end recoiling
Has struck the Pomyéshchick,
The other—the peasant."

PART II

THE LAST POMYÉSHCHICK

PROLOGUE

The day of St. Peter—
  And very hot weather;
The mowers are all
  At their work in the meadows.
The peasants are passing
  A tumble-down village,
Called "Ignorant-Duffers,"
  Of Volost "Old-Dustmen,"
Of Government "Know-Nothing."
  They are approaching
The banks of the Volga.
  They come to the river,
The sea-gulls are wheeling
  And flashing above it;
The sea-hens are walking
  About on the sand-banks;
And in the bare hayfields,
  Which look just as naked
As any youth's cheek
  After yesterday's shaving,
The Princes Volkonsky [1]

[1] The haystacks.

Are haughtily standing,
And round them their children,
Who (unlike all others)
Are born at an earlier
Date than their sires.

"The fields are enormous,"
Remarks old Pakhóm,
"Why, the folk must be giants."
The two brothers Goóbin
Are smiling at something;
For some time they've noticed
A very tall peasant
Who stands with a pitcher
On top of a haystack;
He drinks, and a woman
Below, with a hay-fork,
Is looking at him
With her head leaning back.
The peasants walk on
Till they come to the haystack;
The man is still drinking;
They pass it quite slowly,
Go fifty steps farther,
Then all turn together
And look at the haystack.
Not much has been altered:
The peasant is standing
With body bent back
As before,—but the pitcher
Has turned bottom upwards. . . .

The strangers go farther.
The camps are thrown out
On the banks of the river;
And there the old people

And children are gathered,
  And horses are waiting
With big empty waggons ;
  And then, in the fields
Behind those that are finished,
  The distance is filled
By the army of workers,
  The white shirts of women,
The men's brightly coloured,
  And voices and laughter,
With all intermingled
  The hum of the scythes. . . .

" God help you, good fellows ! "
" Our thanks to you, brothers ! "

  The peasants stand noting
The long line of mowers,
  The poise of the scythes
And their sweep through the sunshine.
  The rhythmical swell
Of melodious murmur.

  The timid grass stands
For a moment, and trembles,
  Then falls with a sigh. . . .

  On the banks of the Volga
The grass has grown high
And the mowers work gladly.
  The peasants soon feel
That they cannot resist it.
" It's long since we've stretched ourselves,
  Come, let us help you ! "
And now seven women

Have yielded their places.
The spirit of work
Is devouring our peasants;
Like teeth in a ravenous
Mouth they are working—
The muscular arms,
And the long grass is falling
To songs that are strange
To this part of the country,
To songs that are taught
By the blizzards and snow-storms,
The wild savage winds
Of the peasants' own homelands:
"Bleak," "Burnt-Out," and "Hungry,"
"Patched," "Bare-Foot," and "Shabby,"
And "Harvestless," too. . . .
And when the strong craving
For work is appeased
They sit down by a haystack.

"From whence have you come?"
A grey-headed old peasant
(The one whom the women
Call Vlásuchka) asks them,
"And where are you going?"

"We are—" say the peasants,
Then suddenly stop,
There's some music approaching!

"Oh, that's the Pomyéshchick
Returning from boating!"
Says Vlásuchka, running
To busy the mowers:
"Wake up! Look alive there!
And mind—above all things,

Don't heat the Pomyéshchick
And don't make him angry!
And if he abuse you,
Bow low and say nothing,
And if he should praise you,
Start lustily cheering.
You women, stop cackling!
And get to your forks!"
A big burly peasant
With beard long and bushy
Bestirs himself also
To busy them all,
Then puts on his "kaftan,"[1]
And runs away quickly
To meet the Pomyéshchick.

And now to the bank-side
Three boats are approaching.
In one sit the servants
And band of musicians,
Most busily playing;
The second one groans
'Neath a mountainous wet-nurse,
Who dandles a baby,
A withered old dry-nurse,
A motionless body
Of ancient retainers.
And then in the third
There are sitting the gentry:
Two beautiful ladies
(One slender and fair-haired,
One heavy and black-browed)
And two moustached Barins
And three little Barins,

[1] A long-skirted coat.

And last—the Pomyéshchick,
A very old man
Wearing long white moustaches
(He seems to be all white);
His cap, broad and high-crowned,
Is white, with a peak,
In the front, of red satin.
His body is lean
As a hare's in the winter,
His nose like a hawk's beak,
His eyes—well, they differ:
The one sharp and shining,
The other—the left eye—
Is sightless and blank,
Like a dull leaden farthing.
Some woolly white poodles
With tufts on their ankles
Are in the boat too.

The old man alighting
Has mounted the bank,
Where for long he reposes
Upon a red carpet
Spread out by the servants.
And then he arises
To visit the mowers,
To pass through the fields
On a tour of inspection.
He leans on the arm—
Now of one of the Barins,
And now upon those
Of the beautiful ladies.
And so with his suite—
With the three little Barins,
The wet-nurse, the dry-nurse,

The ancient retainers,
The woolly white poodles,—
Along through the hayfields
Proceeds the Pomyéshchick.

The peasants on all sides
Bow down to the ground;
And the big, burly peasant
(The Elder he is
As the peasants have noticed)
Is cringing and bending
Before the Pomyéshchick,
Just like the Big Devil
Before the high altar:
"Just so! Yes, Your Highness,
It's done, at your bidding!"
I think he will soon fall
Before the Pomyéshchick
And roll in the dust. . . .

So moves the procession,
Until it stops short
In the front of a haystack
Of wonderful size,
Only this day erected.
The old man is poking
His forefinger in it,
He thinks it is damp,
And he blazes with fury:
"Is this how you rot
The best goods of your master?
I'll rot you with barschin,[1]
I'll make you repent it!
Undo it—at once!"

[1] The forced labour of the serfs for their owners.

The Elder is writhing
In great agitation :
"I was not quite careful
Enough, and it *is* damp.
It's my fault, Your Highness ! "
He summons the peasants,
Who run with their pitchforks
To punish the monster.
And soon they have spread it
In small heaps around,
At the feet of the master ;
His wrath is appeased.

(In the meantime the strangers
Examine the hay—
It's like tinder—so dry !)

A lackey comes flying
Along, with a napkin ;
He's lame—the poor man !
"Please, the luncheon is served."
And then the procession,
The three little Barins,
The wet-nurse, the dry-nurse,
The ancient retainers,
The woolly white poodles,
Moves onward to lunch.

The peasants stand watching ;
From one of the boats
Comes an outburst of music
To greet the Pomyéshchick.

The table is shining
All dazzlingly white

On the bank of the river.
The strangers, astonished,
Draw near to old Vlásuchka ;
" Pray, little Uncle,"
They say, " what's the meaning
Of all these strange doings ?
And who is that curious
Old man ? "

" Our Pomyéshchick,
The great Prince Yutiátin."

" But why is he fussing
About in that manner ?
For things are all changed now,
And he seems to think
They are still as of old.
The hay is quite dry,
Yet he told you to dry it ! "

" But funnier still
That the hay and the hayfields
Are not his at all."

" Then whose are they ? "

" The Commune's."

" Then why is he poking
His nose into matters
Which do not concern him ?
For are you not free ? "

" Why, yes, by God's mercy
The order is changed now
For us as for others ;
But ours is a special case."

" Tell us about it."

The old man lay down
At the foot of the haystack
And answered them—nothing.

The peasants producing
The magic white napkin
Sit down and say softly,
"O napkin enchanted,
Give food to the peasants!"
The napkin unfolds,
And two hands, which come floating
From no one sees where,
Place a bucket of vodka,
A large pile of bread
On the magic white napkin,
And dwindle away. . . .

The peasants, still wishing
To question old Vlásuchka,
Wisely present him
A cupful of vodka:
"Now come, little Uncle,
Be gracious to strangers,
And tell us your story."

"There's nothing to tell you.
You haven't told me yet
Who *you* are and whence
You have journeyed to these parts,
And whither you go."

"We will not be surly
Like you. We will tell you.
We've come a great distance,
And seek to discover
A thing of importance.

A trouble torments us,
It draws us away
From our work, from our homes,
From the love of our food. . . ."
The peasants then tell him
About their chance meeting,
Their argument, quarrel,
Their vow, and decision ;
Of how they had sought
In the Government " Tight-Squeeze "
And Government " Shot-Strewn "
The man who, in Russia,
Is happy and free. . . .

Old Vlásuchka listens,
Observing them keenly.
" I see," he remarks,
When the story is finished,
" I see you are very
Peculiar people.
We're said to be strange here,
But you are still stranger."

" Well, drink some more vodka
And tell us your tale."

And when by the vodka
His tongue becomes loosened,
Old Vlásuchka tells them
The following story.

I

THE DIE-HARD

" The great prince, Yutiátin,
The ancient Pomyéshchick,
Is very eccentric.
His wealth is untold,
And his titles exalted,
His family ranks
With the first in the Empire.
The whole of his life
He has spent in amusement,
Has known no control
Save his own will and pleasure.
When we were set free
He refused to believe it :
' They lie ! the low scoundrels ! '
There came the posrédnik
And Chief of Police,
But he would not admit them,
He ordered them out
And went on as before,
And only became
Full of hate and suspicion :
' Bow low, or I'll flog you
To death, without mercy ! '
The Governor himself came
To try to explain things,
And long they disputed
And argued together ;
The furious voice
Of the prince was heard raging
All over the house,
And he got so excited

That on the same evening
A stroke fell upon him :
His left side went dead,
Black as earth, so they tell us,
And all over nothing !
It wasn't his pocket
That pinched, but his pride
That was touched and enraged him.
He lost but a mite
And would never have missed it."

" Ah, that's what it means, friends,
To be a Pomyéshchick,
The habit gets into
The blood," says Mitródor,
" And not the Pomyéshchick's
Alone, for the habit
Is strong in the peasant
As well," old Pakhóm said.
" I once on suspicion
Was put into prison,
And met there a peasant
Called Sédor, a strange man,
Arrested for horse-stealing,
If I remember ;
And he from the prison
Would send to the Barin
His taxes. (The prisoner's
Income is scanty,
He gets what he begs
Or a trifle for working.)
The others all laughed at him ;
' Why should you send them
And you off for life
To hard labour ? ' they asked him.

But he only said,
'All the same . . . it is better.'"

"Well, now, little Uncle,
Go on with the story."

"A mite is a small thing,
Except when it happens
To be in the eye!
The Pomyéshchick lay senseless,
And many were sure
That he'd never recover.
His children were sent for,
Those black-moustached footguards
(You saw them just now
With their wives, the fine ladies),
The eldest of them
Was to settle all matters
Concerning his father.
He called the posrédnik
To draw up the papers
And sign the agreement,
When suddenly—there
Stands the old man before them!
He springs on them straight
Like a wounded old tiger,
He bellows like thunder.
It was but a short time
Ago, and it happened
That I was then Elder,
And chanced to have entered
The house on some errand,
And I heard myself
How he cursed the Pomyéshchicks;
The words that he spoke
I have never forgotten:

'The Jews are reproached
For betraying their Master;
But what are *you* doing?
The rights of the nobles
By centuries sanctioned
You fling to the beggars!'
He said to his sons,
'Oh, you dastardly cowards!
My children no longer!
It is for small reptiles—
The pope's crawling breed—
To take bribes from vile traitors,
To purchase base peasants,
And they may be pardoned!
But you!—you have sprung
From the house of Yutiátin,
The Princes Yu-tiá-tin
You are! Go! . . . Go, leave me!
You pitiful puppies!'
The heirs were alarmed;
How to tide matters over
Until he should die?
For they are not small items,
The forests and lands
That belong to our father;
His money-bags are not
So light as to make it
A question of nothing
Whose shoulders shall bear them;
We know that our father
Has three 'private' daughters
In Petersburg living,
To Generals married,
So how do we know
That they may not inherit

His wealth ? . . . The Pomyéshchick
Once more is prostrated,
His death is a question
Of time, and to make it
Run smoothly till then
An agreement was come to,
A plan to deceive him :
So one of the ladies
(The fair one, I fancy,
She used at that time
To attend the old master
And rub his left side
With a brush), well, she told him
That orders had come
From the Government lately
That peasants set free
Should return to their bondage.
And he quite believed it.
(You see, since his illness
The Prince had become
Like a child.) When he heard it
He cried with delight ;
And the household was summoned
To prayer round the icons ; [1]
And Thanksgiving Service
Was held by his orders
In every small village,
And bells were set ringing.
And little by little
His strength returned partly,
And then as before
It was hunting and music,
The servants were caned

[1] Holy images.

And the peasants were punished.
The heirs had, of course,
Set things right with the servants,
A good understanding
They came to, and one man
(You saw him go running
Just now with the napkin)
Did not need persuading—
He so loved his Barin.
His name is Ipát,
And when we were made free
He refused to believe it;
'The great Prince Yutiátin
Be left without peasants!
What pranks are you playing?'
At last, when the 'Order
Of Freedom' was shown him,
Ipát said, 'Well, well,
Get you gone to your pleasures,
But I am the slave
Of the Princes Yutiátin!'
He cannot get over
The old Prince's kindness
To him, and he's told us
Some curious stories
Of things that had happened
To him in his childhood,
His youth and old age.
(You see, I had often
To go to the Prince
On some matter or other
Concerning the peasants,
And waited and waited
For hours in the kitchens,
And so I have heard them

A hundred times over.)
'When I was a young man
Our gracious young Prince
Spent his holidays sometimes
At home, and would dip me
(His meanest slave, mind you)
Right under the ice
In the depths of the Winter.
He did it in such
A remarkable way, too!
He first made two holes
In the ice of the river,
In one he would lower
Me down in a net—
Pull me up through the other!'
And when I began
To grow old, it would happen
That sometimes I drove
With the Prince in the Winter;
The snow would block up
Half the road, and we used
To drive five-in-a-file.
Then the fancy would strike him
(How whimsical, mark you!)
To set me astride
On the horse which was leading,
Me—last of his slaves!
Well, he dearly loved music,
And so he would throw me
A fiddle: "Here! play now,
Ipát." Then the driver
Would shout to the horses,
And urge them to gallop.
The snow would half-blind me,
My hands with the music

Were occupied both ;
So what with the jolting,
The snow, and the fiddle,
Ipát, like a silly
Old noodle, would tumble.
Of course, if he landed
Right under the horses
The sledge must go over
His ribs,—who could help it ?
But that was a trifle ;
The cold was the worst thing,
It bites you, and you
Can do nothing against it !
The snow lay all round
On the vast empty desert,
I lay looking up
At the stars and confessing
My sins. But—my friends,
This is true as the Gospel—
I heard before long
How the sledge-bells came ringing,
Drew nearer and nearer :
The Prince had remembered,
And come back to fetch me ! '

" (The tears began falling
And rolled down his face
At this part of the story.
Whenever he told it
He always would cry
Upon coming to this !)
' He covered me up
With some rugs, and he warmed me,
He lifted me up,
And he placed me beside him,

Me—last of his slaves—
Beside his Princely Person !
And so we came home.' "

They're amused at the story.

Old Vlásuchka, when
He has emptied his fourth cup,
Continues : " The heirs came
And called us together—
The peasants and servants ;
They said, ' We're distressed
On account of our father.
These changes will kill him,
He cannot sustain them.
So humour his weakness :
Keep silent, and act still
As if all this trouble
Had never existed ;
Give way to him, bow to him
Just as in old days.
For each stroke of barschin,
For all needless labour,
For every rough word
We will richly reward you.
He cannot live long now,
The doctors have told us
That two or three months
Is the most we may hope for.
Act kindly towards us,
And do as we ask you,
And we as the price
Of your silence will give you
The hayfields which lie
On the banks of the Volga.
Think well of our offer,

And let the posrédnik
Be sent for to witness
And settle the matter.'

"Then gathered the commune
To argue and clamour;
The thought of the hayfields
(In which we are sitting),
With promises boundless
And plenty of vodka,
Decided the question:
The commune would wait
For the death of the Barin.

"Then came the posrédnik,
And laughing, he said:
'It's a capital notion!
The hayfields are fine, too,
You lose nothing by it;
You just play the fool
And the Lord will forgive you.
You know, it's forbidden
To no one in Russia
To bow and be silent.'

"But I was against it:
I said to the peasants,
'For you it is easy,
But how about me?
Whatever may happen
The Elder must come
To accounts with the Barin,
And how can I answer
His babyish questions?
And how can I do
His nonsensical bidding?'

" ' Just take off your hat
And bow low, and say nothing,
  And then you walk out
And the thing's at an end.
  The old man is ill,
He is weak and forgetful,
  And nothing will stay
In his head for an instant.'

" Perhaps they were right ;
To deceive an old madman
  Is not very hard.
But for my part, I don't want
  To play at buffoon.
For how many years
  Have I stood on the threshold
And bowed to the Barin ?
  Enough for my pleasure !
I said, ' If the commune
  Is pleased to be ruled
By a crazy Pomyéshchick
  To ease his last moments
I don't disagree,
  I have nothing against it ;
But then, set me free
  From my duties as Elder.'

" The whole matter nearly
  Fell through at that moment,
But then Klímka Lávin said,
  ' Let *me* be Elder,
I'll please you on both sides,
  The master and you.
The Lord will soon take him,
  And then the fine hayfields
Will come to the commune.

I swear I'll establish
Such order amongst you
You'll die of the fun ! '

" The commune took long
To consider this offer :
A desperate fellow
Is Klímka the peasant,
A drunkard, a rover,
And not very honest,
No lover of work,
And acquainted with gipsies ;
A vagabond, knowing
A lot about horses.
A scoffer at those
Who work hard, he will tell you :
' At work you will never
Get rich, my fine fellow ;
You'll never get rich,—
But you're sure to get crippled ! '
But he, all the same,
Is well up in his letters ;
Has been to St. Petersburg.
Yes, and to Moscow,
And once to Siberia, too,
With the merchants.
A pity it was
That he ever returned !
He's clever enough,
But he can't keep a farthing ;
He's sharp—but he's always
In some kind of trouble.
He's picked some fine words up
From out of his travels :
' Our Fatherland dear,'

And ' The soul of great Russia,'
  And ' Moscow, the mighty,
Illustrious city ! '
  ' And I,' he will shout,
' Am a plain Russian peasant ! '
  And striking his forehead
He'll swallow the vodka.
  A bottle at once
He'll consume, like a mouthful.
  He'll fall at your feet
For a bottle of vodka.
  But if he has money
He'll share with you, freely ;
  The first man he meets
May partake of his drink.
  He's clever at shouting
And cheating and fooling,
  At showing the best side
Of goods which are rotten,
At boasting and lying ;
  And when he is caught
He'll slip out through a cranny,
  And throw you a jest,
Or his favourite saying :
  ' A crack in the jaw
Will your honesty bring you ! '

" Well, after much thinking
The commune decided
  That I must remain
The responsible Elder ;
  But Klímka might act
In my stead to the Barin
  As though he were Elder.
Why, then, let him do it !

The right kind of Elder
He is for his Barin,
They make a fine pair!
Like putty his conscience;
Like Meenin's [1] his beard,
So that looking upon him
You'd think a sedater,
More dutiful peasant
Could never be found.
The heirs made his kaftan,
And he put it on,
And from Klímka the 'scapegrace'
He suddenly changed
Into Klím, Son-of-Jacob,[2]
Most worthy of Elders.
So that's how it is;—
And to our great misfortune
The Barin is ordered
A carriage-drive daily.
Each day through the village
He drives in a carriage
That's built upon springs.
Then up you jump, quickly,
And whip off your hat,
And, God knows for what reason,
He'll jump down your throat,
He'll upbraid and abuse you;
But you must keep silent.
He watches a peasant
At work in the fields,

[1] Meenin—a famous Russian patriot in the beginning of the seventeenth century. He is always represented with an immense beard.

[2] It is a sign of respect to address a person by his own name and the name of his father.

And he swears we are lazy
And lie-abed sluggards
(Though never worked peasant
With half such a will
In the time of the Barin).
He has not a notion
That they are not *his* fields,
But ours. When we gather
We laugh, for each peasant
Has something to tell
Of the crazy Pomyéshchick ;
His ears burn, I warrant,
When we come together !
And Klím, Son-of-Jacob,
Will run, with the manner
Of bearing the commune
Some news of importance
(The pig has got proud
Since he's taken to scratching
His sides on the steps
Of the nobleman's manor).
He runs and he shouts :
'A command to the commune !
I told the Pomyéshchick
That Widow Teréntevna's
Cottage had fallen.
And that she is begging
Her bread. He commands you
To marry the widow
To Gabriel Jóckoff;
To rebuild the cottage,
And let them reside there
And multiply freely.'

"The bride will be seventy,

Seven the bridegroom !
Well, who could help laughing ?
Another command :
' The dull-witted cows,
Driven out before sunrise,
Awoke the Pomyéshchick
By foolishly mooing
While passing his courtyard.
The cow-herd is ordered
To see that the cows
Do not moo in that manner ! ' "

The peasants laugh loudly.

" But why do you laugh so ?
We all have our fancies.
Yakútsk was once governed,
I heard, by a General ;
He had a liking
For sticking live cows
Upon spikes round the city,
And every free spot
Was adorned in that manner,
As Petersburg is,
So they say, with its statues,
Before it had entered
The heads of the people
That he was a madman.

" Another strict order
Was sent to the commune :
' The dog which belongs
To Sofrónoff the watchman
Does not behave nicely,
It barked at the Barin.

Be therefore Sofrónoff
Dismissed. Let Evrémka
Be watchman to guard
The estate of the Barin.'
(Another loud laugh,
For Evrémka, the 'simple,'
Is known as the deaf-mute
And fool of the village).
But Klímka's delighted:
At last he's found something
That suits him exactly.
He bustles about
And in everything meddles,
And even drinks less.
There's a sharp little woman
Whose name is Orévna,
And she is Klím's gossip,
And finely she helps him
To fool the old Barin.
And as to the women,
They're living in clover:
They run to the manor
With linen and mushrooms
And strawberries, knowing
The ladies will buy them
And pay what they ask them
And feed them besides.
We laughed and made game
Till we fell into danger
And nearly were lost:
There was one man among us,
Petrov, an ungracious
And bitter-tongued peasant;
He never forgave us
Because we'd consented

To humour the Barin.
'The Tsar,' he would say,
'Has had mercy upon you,
And now, you, yourselves
Lift the load to your backs.
To Hell with the hayfields!
We want no more masters!'
We only could stop him
By giving him vodka
(His weakness was vodka).
The devil must needs
Fling him straight at the Barin.
One morning Petrov
Had set out to the forest
To pilfer some logs
(For the night would not serve him,
It seems, for his thieving,
He must go and do it
In broadest white daylight),
And there comes the carriage,
On springs, with the Barin!

"'From whence, little peasant,
That beautiful tree-trunk?
From whence has it come?'
He knew, the old fellow,
From whence it had come.
Petrov stood there silent,
And what could he answer?
He'd taken the tree
From the Barin's own forest.

"The Barin already
Is bursting with anger;
He nags and reproaches,

He can't stop recalling
The rights of the nobles.
The rank of his Fathers,
He winds them all into
Petrov, like a corkscrew.

"The peasants are patient,
But even their patience
Must come to an end.
Petrov was out early,
Had eaten no breakfast,
Felt dizzy already,
And now with the words
Of the Barin all buzzing
Like flies in his ears—
Why, he couldn't keep steady,
He laughed in his face!

"'Have done, you old scarecrow!'
He said to the Barin.
'You crazy old clown!'
His jaw once unmuzzled
He let enough words out
To stuff the Pomyéshchick
With Fathers and Grandfathers
Into the bargain.
The oaths of the lords
Are like stings of mosquitoes,
But those of the peasant
Like blows of the pick-axe.
The Barin's dumbfounded!
He'd safely encounter
A rain of small shot,
But he cannot face stones.
The ladies are with him,

They, too, are bewildered,
They run to the peasant
And try to restrain him.

"He bellows, 'I'll kill you!
For what are you swollen
With pride, you old dotard,
You scum of the pig-sty?
Have done with your jabber!
You've lost your strong grip
On the soul of the peasant,
The last one you are.
By the will of the peasant
Because he is foolish
They treat you as master
To-day. But to-morrow
The ball will be ended;
A good kick behind
We will give the Pomyéshchick,
And tail between legs
Send him back to his dwelling
To leave us in peace!'

"The Barin is gasping,
'You rebel . . . you rebel!'
He trembles all over,
Half-dead he has fallen,
And lies on the earth!

"The end! think the others,
The black-moustached footguards,
The beautiful ladies;
But they are mistaken;
It isn't the end.

"An order: to summon
The village together
To witness the punishment
Dealt to the rebel
Before the Pomyéshchick. . . .
The heirs and the ladies
Come running in terror
To Klím, to Petrov,
And to me: 'Only save us!'
Their faces are pale,
'If the trick is discovered
We're lost!'
It is Klím's place
To deal with the matter:
He drinks with Petrov
All day long, till the evening,
Embracing him fondly.
Together till midnight
They pace round the village,
At midnight start drinking
Again till the morning.
Petrov is as tipsy
As ever man was,
And like that he is brought
To the Barin's large courtyard,
And all is perfection!
The Barin can't move
From the balcony, thanks
To his yesterday's shaking.
And Klím is well pleased.

"He leads Petrov into
The stable and sets him
In front of a gallon
Of vodka, and tells him:

'Now, drink and start crying,
"Oh, oh, little Fathers!
Oh, oh, little Mothers!
Have mercy! Have mercy!"'

"Petrov does his bidding;
He howls, and the Barin,
Perched up on the balcony,
Listens in rapture.
He drinks in the sound
Like the loveliest music.
And who could help laughing
To hear him exclaiming,
'Don't spare him, the villain!
The im-pu-dent rascal!
Just teach him a lesson!'
Petrov yells aloud
Till the vodka is finished.
Of course in the end
He is perfectly helpless,
And four peasants carry him
Out of the stable.
His state is so sorry
That even the Barin
Has pity upon him,
And says to him sweetly,
'Your own fault it is,
Little peasant, you know!'"

"You see what a kind heart
He has, the Pomyéshchick,"
Says Prov, and old Vlásuchka
Answers him quietly,
"A saying there is:
'Praise the grass—in the haystack,
The lord—in his coffin.'

'Twere well if God took him.
Petrov is no longer
Alive. That same evening
He started up, raving,
At midnight the pope came,
And just as the day dawned
He died. He was buried,
A cross set above him,
And God alone knows
What he died of. It's certain
That we never touched him,
Nay, not with a finger,
Much less with a stick.
Yet sometimes the thought comes:
Perhaps if that accident
Never had happened
Petrov would be living.
You see, friends, the peasant
Was proud more than others,
He carried his head high,
And never had bent it,
And now of a sudden—
Lie down for the Barin!
Fall flat for his pleasure!
The thing went off well,
But Petrov had not wished it.
I think he was frightened
To anger the commune
By not giving in,
And the commune is foolish,
It soon will destroy you. . . .
The ladies were ready
To kiss the old peasant,
They brought fifty roubles
For him, and some dainties.

'Twas Klímka, the scamp,
The unscrupulous sinner,
Who worked his undoing. . . .

"A servant is coming
To us from the Barin,
They've finished their lunch.
Perhaps they have sent him
To summon the Elder.
I'll go and look on
At the comedy there."

II

KLÍM, THE ELDER

With him go the strangers,
And some of the women
And men follow after,
For mid-day has sounded,
Their rest-time it is,
So they gather together
To stare at the gentry,
To whisper and wonder.
They stand in a row
At a dutiful distance
Away from the Prince. . . .

At a long snowy table
Quite covered with bottles
And all kinds of dishes
Are sitting the gentry,
The old Prince presiding
In dignified state

At the head of the table ;
All white, dressed in white,
With his face shrunk awry,
His dissimilar eyes ;
In his button-hole fastened
A little white cross
(It's the cross of St. George,
Some one says in a whisper) ;
And standing behind him,
Ipát, the domestic,
The faithful old servant,
In white tie and shirt-front
Is brushing the flies off.
Beside the Pomyéshchick
On each hand are sitting
The beautiful ladies :
The one with black tresses,
Her lips red as beetroots,
Each eye like an apple ;
The other, the fair-haired,
With yellow locks streaming.
(Oh, you yellow locks,
Like spun gold do you glisten
And glow, in the sunshine !)
Then perched on three high chairs
The three little Barins,
Each wearing his napkin
Tucked under his chin,
With the old nurse beside them,
And further the body
Of ancient retainers ;
And facing the Prince
At the foot of the table,
The black-moustached footguards
Are sitting together.

Behind each chair standing
A young girl is serving,
And women are waving
The flies off with branches.
The woolly white poodles
Are under the table,
The three little Barins
Are teasing them slyly.

Before the Pomyéshchick,
Bare-headed and humble,
The Elder is standing.
" Now tell me, how soon
Will the mowing be finished ? "
The Barin says, talking
And eating at once.

" It soon will be finished.
Three days of the week
Do we work for your Highness ;
A man with a horse,
And a youth or a woman,
And half an old woman
From every allotment.
To-day for this week
Is the Barin's term finished."

" Tut-tut ! " says the Barin,
Like one who has noticed
Some crafty intent
On the part of another.
" ' The Barin's term,' say you ?
Now, what do you mean, pray ? "
The eye which is bright
He has fixed on the peasant.

The Elder is hanging
His head in confusion.
"Of course it must be
As your Highness may order.
In two or three days,
If the weather be gracious,
The hay of your Highness
Can surely be gathered.
That's so,—is it not?"

(He turns his broad face round
And looks at the peasants.)
And then the sharp woman,
Klím's gossip, Orévna,
Makes answer for them:
"Yes, Klím, Son-of-Jacob,
The hay of the Barin
Is surely more precious
Than ours. We must tend it
As long as the weather lasts;
Ours may come later."

"A woman she is,
But more clever than you,"
The Pomyéshchick says smiling,
And then of a sudden
Is shaken with laughter:
"Ha, ha! Oh, you blockhead!
Ha, ha! fool! fool! fool!
It's the 'Barin's term,' say you?
Ha, ha! fool, ha, ha!
The Barin's term, slave,
Is the whole of your life-time;
And you have forgotten
That I, by God's mercy,

By Tsar's ancient charter,
By birth and by merit,
Am your supreme master ! "

The strangers remark here
That Vlásuchka gently
Slips down to the grass.

" What's that for ? " they ask him.
" We may as well rest now ;
He's off. You can't stop him.
For since it was rumoured
That we should be given
Our freedom, the Barin
Takes care to remind us
That till the last hour
Of the world will the peasant
Be clenched in the grip
Of the nobles." And really
An hour slips away
And the Prince is still speaking ;
His tongue will not always
Obey him, he splutters
And hisses, falls over
His words, and his right eye
So shares his disquiet
That it trembles and twitches.
The left eye expands,
Grows as round as an owl's eye,
Revolves like a wheel.
The rights of his Fathers
Through ages respected,
His services, merits,
His name and possessions,
The Barin rehearses.

God's curse, the Tsar's anger,
He hurls at the heads
Of obstreperous peasants.
And strictly gives order
To sweep from the commune
All senseless ideas,
Bids the peasants remember
That they are his slaves
And must honour their master.

"Our Fathers," cried Klím,
And his voice sounded strangely,
It rose to a squeak
As if all things within him
Leapt up with a passionate
Joy of a sudden
At thought of the mighty
And noble Pomyéshchicks,
"And whom should we serve
Save the Master we cherish?
And whom should we honour?
In whom should we hope?
We feed but on sorrows,
We bathe but in tear-drops,
How can we rebel?

"Our tumble-down hovels,
Our weak little bodies,
Ourselves, we are yours,
We belong to our Master.
The seeds which we sow
In the earth, and the harvest,
The hair on our heads—
All belongs to the Master.
Our ancestors fallen
To dust in their coffins,

Our feeble old parents
Who nod on the oven,
Our little ones lying
Asleep in their cradles
Are yours—are our Master's,
And we in our homes
Use our wills but as freely
As fish in a net."

The words of the Elder
Have pleased the Pomyéshchick,
The right eye is gazing
Benignantly at him,
The left has grown smaller
And peaceful again
Like the moon in the heavens.
He pours out a goblet
Of red foreign wine:
"Drink," he says to the peasant.
The rich wine is burning
Like blood in the sunshine;
Klím drinks without protest.
Again he is speaking:

"Our Fathers," he says,
"By your mercy we live now
As though in the bosom
Of Christ. Let the peasant
But try to exist
Without grace from the Barin!"
(He sips at the goblet.)
"The whole world would perish
If not for the Barin's
Deep wisdom and learning,
If not for the peasant's
Most humble submission.

By birth, and God's holy
Decree you are bidden
To govern the stupid
And ignorant peasant;
By God's holy will
Is the peasant commanded
To honour and cherish
And work for his lord!"

And here the old servant,
Ipát, who is standing
Behind the Pomyéshchick
And waving his branches,
Begins to sob loudly,
The tears streaming down
O'er his withered old face:
"Let us pray that the Barin
For many long years
May be spared to his servants!"
The simpleton blubbers,
The loving old servant,
And raising his hand,
Weak and trembling, he crosses
Himself without ceasing.
The black-moustached footguards
Look sourly upon him
With secret displeasure.
But how can they help it?
So off come their hats
And they cross themselves also.
And then the old Prince
And the wrinkled old dry-nurse
Both sign themselves thrice,
And the Elder does likewise.

He winks to the woman,
His sharp little gossip,
And straightway the women,
Who nearer and nearer
Have drawn to the table,
Begin most devoutly
To cross themselves too.
And one begins sobbing
In just such a manner
As had the old servant.
(" That's right, now, start whining,
Old Widow Teréntevna,
Sill-y old noodle ! "
Says Vlásuchka, crossly.)

The red sun peeps slyly
At them from a cloud,
And the slow, dreamy music
Is heard from the river. . . .

The ancient Pomyéshchick
Is moved, and the right eye
Is blinded with tears,
Till the golden-haired lady
Removes them and dries it ;
She kisses the other eye
Heartily too.

" You see ! " then remarks
The old man to his children,
The two stalwart sons
And the pretty young ladies ;
" I wish that those villains,
Those Petersburg liars

Who say we are tyrants,
Could only be here now
To see and hear this ! "

But then something happened
Which checked of a sudden
The speech of the Barin :
A peasant who couldn't
Control his amusement
Gave vent to his laughter.

The Barin starts wildly,
He clutches the table,
He fixes his face
In the sinner's direction ;
The right eye is fierce,
Like a lynx he is watching
To dart on his prey,
And the left eye is whirling.
" Go, find him ! " he hisses,
" Go, fetch him ! the scoundrel ! "

The Elder dives straight
In the midst of the people ;
He asks himself wildly,
" Now, what's to be done ? "
He makes for the edge
Of the crowd, where are sitting
The journeying strangers ;
His voice is like honey :
" Come one of you forward ;
You see, you are strangers,
He wouldn't touch *you*."

But they are not anxious
To face the Pomyéshchick,

Although they would gladly
Have helped the poor peasants.
He's mad, the old Barin,
So what's to prevent him
From beating them too ?

"Well, you go, Román,"
Say the two brothers Góobin,
"*You* love the Pomyéshchicks."

"I'd rather you went, though ! "
And each is quite willing
To offer the other.
Then Klím looses patience ;
"Now, Vlásuchka, help us !
Do something to save us !
I'm sick of the thing ! "

"Yes ! Nicely you lied there ! "

"Oho ! " says Klím sharply,
"What lies did I tell ?
And shan't we be choked
In the grip of the Barins
Until our last day
When we lie in our coffins ?
When we get to Hell, too,
Won't they be there waiting
To set us to work ? "

"What kind of a job
Would they find for us there, Klím ? "

"To stir up the fire
While they boil in the pots ! "
The others laugh loudly.

The sons of the Barin
  Come hurrying to them ;
" How foolish you are, Klím !
  Our father has sent us,
He's terribly angry
  That you are so long,
And don't bring the offender."

" We can't bring him, Barin ;
A stranger he is,
  From St. Petersburg province,
A very rich peasant ;
  The devil has sent him
To us, for our sins !
  He can't understand us,
And things here amuse him ;
  He couldn't help laughing."

" Well, let him alone, then.
  Cast lots for a culprit,
We'll pay him. Look here ! "
  He offers five roubles.
Oh, no. It won't tempt them.

" Well, run to the Barin,
And say that the fellow
  Has hidden himself."

" But what when to-morrow comes ?
Have you forgotten
  Petrov, how we punished
The innocent peasant ? "

" Then what's to be done ? "

" Give me the five roubles !
You trust me, I'll save you ! "
Exclaims the sharp woman,
The Elder's sly gossip.
She runs from the peasants
Lamenting and groaning,
And flings herself straight
At the feet of the Barin :

" O red little sun !
O my Father, don't kill me !
I have but one child,
Oh, have pity upon him !
My poor boy is daft,
Without wits the Lord made him,
And sent him so into
The world. He is crazy.
Why, straight from the bath
He at once begins scratching ;
His drink he will try
To pour into his laputs
Instead of the jug.
And of work he knows nothing ;
He laughs, and that's all
He can do—so God made him !
Our poor little home,
'Tis small comfort he brings it ;
Our hut is in ruins,
Not seldom it happens
We've nothing to eat,
And that sets him laughing—
The poor crazy loon !
You may give him a farthing,
A crack on the skull,
And at one and the other

He'll laugh—so God made him !
And what can one say ?
From a fool even sorrow
Comes pouring in laughter."

The knowing young woman !
She lies at the feet
Of the Barin, and trembles,
She squeals like a silly
Young girl when you pinch her,
She kisses his feet.

" Well . . . go. God be with you ! "
The Barin says kindly,
" I need not be angry
At idiot laughter,
I'll laugh at him too ! "

" How good you are, Father,"
The black-eyed young lady
Says sweetly, and strokes
The white head of the Barin.
The black-moustached footguards
At this put their word in :

" A fool cannot follow
The words of his masters,
Especially those
Like the words of our father,
So noble and clever."

And Klím—shameless rascal !—
Is wiping his eyes
On the end of his coat-tails,
Is sniffing and whining ;
" Our Fathers ! Our Fathers !

The sons of our Father !
They know how to punish,
But better they know
How to pardon and pity ! "

The old man is cheerful
Again, and is asking
For light frothing wine,
And the corks begin popping
And shoot in the air
To fall down on the women,
Who fly from them, shrieking.
The Barin is laughing,
The ladies then laugh,
And at them laugh their husbands,
And next the old servant,
Ipát, begins laughing,
The wet-nurse, the dry-nurse,
And then the whole party
Laugh loudly together ;
The feast will be merry !
His daughters-in-law
At the old Prince's order
Are pouring out vodka
To give to the peasants,
Hand cakes to the youths,
To the girls some sweet syrup ;
The women drink also
A small glass of vodka.
The old Prince is drinking
And toasting the peasants ;
And slyly he pinches
The beautiful ladies.
" That's right ! That will do him
More good than his physic,"

Says Vlásuchka, watching.
"He drinks by the glassful,
Since long he's lost measure
In revel, or wrath. . . ."

The music comes floating
To them from the Volga,
The girls now already
Are dancing and singing,
The old Prince is watching them,
Snapping his fingers.
He wants to be nearer
The girls, and he rises.
His legs will not bear him,
His two sons support him;
And standing between them
He chuckles and whistles,
And stamps with his feet
To the time of the music;
The left eye begins
On its own account working,
It turns like a wheel.

"But why aren't you dancing?"
He says to his sons,
And the two pretty ladies.
"Dance! Dance!" They can't help themselves,
There they are dancing!
He laughs at them gaily,
He wishes to show them
How things went in *his* time;
He's shaking and swaying
Like one on the deck
Of a ship in rough weather.

"Sing, Luiba!" he orders.
The golden-haired lady
Does not want to sing,
But the old man will have it.
The lady is singing
A song low and tender,
It sounds like the breeze
On a soft summer evening
In velvety grasses
Astray, like spring raindrops
That kiss the young leaves,
And it soothes the Pomyéshchick.
The feeble old man:
He is falling asleep now. . . .
And gently they carry him
Down to the water,
And into the boat,
And he lies there, still sleeping.
Above him stands, holding
A big green umbrella,
The faithful old servant,
His other hand guarding
The sleeping Pomyéshchick
From gnats and mosquitoes.
The oarsmen are silent,
The faint-sounding music
Can hardly be heard
As the boat moving gently
Glides on through the water. . . .

The peasants stand watching:
The bright yellow hair
Of the beautiful lady
Streams out in the breeze
Like a long golden banner. . . .

" I managed him finely,
The noble Pomyéshchick,"
Said Klím to the peasants.
" Be God with you, Barin !
Go bragging and scolding,
Don't think for a moment
That we are now free
And your servants no longer,
But die as you lived,
The almighty Pomyéshchick,
To sound of our music,
To songs of your slaves ;
But only die quickly,
And leave the poor peasants
In peace. And now, brothers,
Come, praise me and thank me !
I've gladdened the commune.
I shook in my shoes there
Before the Pomyéshchick,
For fear I should trip
Or my tongue should betray me ;
And worse—I could hardly
Speak plain for my laughter !
That eye ! How it spins !
And you look at it, thinking :
' But whither, my friend,
Do you hurry so quickly ?
On some hasty errand
Of yours, or another's ?
Perhaps with a pass
From the Tsar—Little Father,
You carry a message
From him.' I was standing
And bursting with laughter !
Well, I am a drunken

And frivolous peasant,
The rats in my corn-loft
Are starving from hunger,
My hut is quite bare,
Yet I call God to witness
That I would not take
Such an office upon me
For ten hundred roubles
Unless I were certain
That he was the last,
That I bore with his bluster
To serve my own ends,
Of my own will and pleasure."

Old Vlásuchka sadly
And thoughtfully answers,
"How long, though, how long, though,
Have we—not we only
But all Russian peasants—
Endured the Pomyéshchicks?
And not for our pleasure,
For money or fun,
Not for two or three months,
But for life. What has changed, though?
Of what are we bragging?
For still we are peasants."

The peasants, half-tipsy,
Congratulate Klímka.
"Hurrah! Let us toss him!"
And now they are placing
Old Widow Teréntevna
Next to her bridegroom,
The little child Jóckoff,
Saluting them gaily.

They're eating and drinking
What's left on the table.
Then romping and jesting
They stay till the evening,
And only at nightfall
Return to the village.
And here they are met
By some sobering tidings:
The old Prince is dead.
From the boat he was taken,
They thought him asleep,
But they found he was lifeless.
The second stroke—while
He was sleeping—had fallen!

The peasants are sobered,
They look at each other,
And silently cross themselves.
Then they breathe deeply;
And never before
Did the poor squalid village
Called "Ignorant-Duffers,"
Of Volost "Old-Dustmen,"
Draw such an intense
And unanimous breath. . . .
Their pleasure, however,
Was not very lasting,
Because with the death
Of the ancient Pomyéshchick,
The sweet-sounding words
Of his heirs and their bounties
Ceased also. Not even
A pick-me-up after
The yesterday's feast
Did they offer the peasants.

And as to the hayfields—
Till now is the law-suit
Proceeding between them,
The heirs and the peasants.
Old Vlásuchka was
By the peasants appointed
To plead in their name,
And he lives now in Moscow.
He went to St. Petersburg too,
But I don't think
That much can be done
For the cause of the peasants.

PART III

THE PEASANT WOMAN

PROLOGUE

" Not only to men
Must we go with our question,
We'll ask of the women,"
The peasants decided.
They asked in the village
" Split-up," but the people
Replied to them shortly,
" Not here will you find one.
But go to the village
' Stripped-Naked '—a woman
Lives there who is happy.
She's hardly a woman,
She's more like a cow,
For a woman so healthy,
So smooth and so clever,
Could hardly be found.
You must seek in the village
Matróna Korchágin—
The people there call her
' The Governor's Lady.' "
The peasants considered
And went. . . .

Now already
The corn-stalks are rising
Like tall graceful columns,
With gilded heads nodding,
And whispering softly
In gentle low voices.
Oh, beautiful summer!
No time is so gorgeous,
So regal, so rich.

You full yellow cornfields,
To look at you now
One would never imagine
How sorely God's people
Had toiled to array you
Before you arose,
In the sight of the peasant,
And stood before him,
Like a glorious army
In front of a Tsar!
'Tis not by warm dew-drops
That you have been moistened,
The sweat of the peasant
Has fallen upon you.

The peasants are gladdened
At sight of the oats
And the rye and the barley,
But not by the wheat,
For it feeds but the chosen:
"We love you not, wheat!
But the rye and the barley
We love—they are kind,
They feed all men alike."

The flax, too, is growing
So sweetly and bravely :
" Ai ! you little mite !
You are caught and entangled ! "
A poor little lark
In the flax has been captured ;
It struggles for freedom.
Pakhóm picks it up,
He kisses it tenderly :
" Fly, little birdie ! " . . .
The lark flies away
To the blue heights of Heaven ;
The kind-hearted peasants
Gaze lovingly upwards
To see it rejoice
In the freedom above. . . .
The peas have come on, too ;
Like locusts, the peasants
Attack them and eat them.
They're like a plump maiden—
The peas—for whoever
Goes by must needs pinch them.
Now peas are being carried
In old hands, in young hands,
They're spreading abroad
Over seventy high-roads.
The vegetables—how
They're flourishing also !
Each toddler is clasping
A radish or carrot,
And many are cracking
The seeds of the sunflower.
The beetroots are dotted
Like little red slippers
All over the earth.

Our peasants are walking,
Now faster—now slower.
At last they have reached it—
The village ' Stripped-Naked,'
It's not much to look at :
Each hut is propped up
Like a beggar on crutches ;
The thatch from the roofs
Has made food for the cattle ;
The huts are like feeble
Old skeletons standing,
Like desolate rooks' nests
When young birds forsake them,
When wild Autumn winds
Have dismantled the birch-trees.
The people are all
In the fields ; they are working.
Behind the poor village
A manor is standing ;
It's built on the slope
Of a hill, and the peasants
Are making towards it
To look at it close.

The house is gigantic,
The courtyard is huge,
There's a pond in it too ;
A watch-tower arises
From over the house,
With a gallery round it,
A flagstaff upon it.

They meet with a lackey
Near one of the gates :
He seems to be wearing

A strange kind of mantle ;
" Well, what are you up to ? "
He says to the friends,
" The Pomyéshchick's abroad now,
The manager's dying."
He shows them his back,
And they all begin laughing :
A tiger is clutching
The edge of his shoulders !
" Heh ! here's a fine joke ! "
They are hotly discussing
What kind of a mantle
The lackey is wearing,
Till clever Pakhóm
Has got hold of the riddle.
" The cunning old rascal,
He's stolen a carpet,
And cut in the middle
A hole for his head ! "

Like weak, straddling beetles
Shut up to be frozen
In cold empty huts
By the pitiless peasants.
The servants are crawling
All over the courtyard.
Their master long since
Has forgotten about them,
And left them to live
As they can. They are hungry,
All old and decrepit,
And dressed in all manners,
They look like a crowd
In a gipsy encampment.
And some are now dragging

A net through the pond :
" God come to your help !
Have you caught something, brothers ? "
" One carp—nothing more ;
There used once to be many,
But now we have come
To the end of the feast ! "

" Do try to get five ! "
Says a pale, pregnant woman,
Who's fervently blowing
A fire near the pond.

" And what are those pretty
Carved poles you are burning ?
They're balcony railings,
I think, are they not ? "

" Yes, balcony railings."

" See here. They're like tinder ;
Don't blow on them, Mother !
I bet they'll burn faster
Than you find the victuals
To cook in the pot ! "

" I'm waiting and waiting,
And Mítyenka sickens
Because of the musty
Old bread that I give him.
But what can I do ?
This life—it is bitter ! "
She fondles the head
Of a half-naked baby
Who sits by her side

In a little brass basin,
A button-nosed mite.

"The boy will take cold there,
The basin will chill him,"
Says Prov; and he wishes
To lift the child up,
But it screams at him, angry.
"No, no! Don't you touch him,"
The mother says quickly,
"Why, can you not see
That's his carriage he's driving?
Drive on, little carriage!
Gee-up, little horses!
You see how he drives!"

The peasants each moment
Observe some new marvel;
And soon they have noticed
A strange kind of labour
Proceeding around them:
One man, it appears,
To the door has got fastened;
He's toiling away
To unscrew the brass handles,
His hands are so weak
He can scarcely control them.
Another is hugging
Some tiles: "See, Yegórshka,
I've dug quite a heap out!"
Some children are shaking
An apple-tree yonder:
"You see, little Uncles,
There aren't many left,
Though the tree was quite heavy."

"But why do you want them?
They're quite hard and green."
"We're thankful to get them!"

The peasants examine
The park for a long time;
Such wonders are seen here,
Such cunning inventions:
In one place a mountain
Is raised; in another
A ravine yawns deep!
A lake has been made too;
Perhaps at one time
There were swans on the water?
The summer-house has some
Inscriptions upon it,
Demyán begins spelling
Them out very slowly.
A grey-haired domestic
Is watching the peasants;
He sees they have very
Inquisitive natures,
And presently slowly
Goes hobbling towards them,
And holding a book.
He says, "Will you buy it?"
Demyán is a peasant
Acquainted with letters,
He tries for some time
But he can't read a word.

"Just sit down yourself
On that seat near the linden,
And read the book leisurely
Like a Pomyéshchick!"

" You think you are clever,"
The grey-headed servant
Retorts with resentment,
" Yet books which are learned
Are wasted upon you.
You read but the labels
On public-house windows,
And that which is written
On every odd corner :
' Most strictly forbidden.' "

The pathways are filthy,
The graceful stone ladies
Bereft of their noses.
" The fruit and the berries,
The geese and the swans
Which were once on the water,
The thieving old rascals
Have stuffed in their maws.
Like church without pastor,
Like fields without peasants,
Are all these fine gardens
Without a Pomyéshchick,"
The peasants remark.
For long the Pomyéshchick
Has gathered his treasures,
When all of a sudden. . . .
(The six peasants laugh,
But the seventh is silent,
He hangs down his head.)

A song bursts upon them !
A voice is resounding
Like blasts of a trumpet.
The heads of the peasants
Are eagerly lifted,

They gaze at the tower.
On the balcony round it
A man is now standing;
He wears a pope's cassock;
He sings . . . on the balmy
Soft air of the evening,
The bass, like a huge
Silver bell, is vibrating,
And throbbing it enters
The hearts of the peasants.
The words are not Russian,
But some foreign language,
But, like Russian songs,
It is full of great sorrow,
Of passionate grief,
Unending, unfathomed;
It wails and laments,
It is bitterly sobbing. . . .

"Pray tell us, good woman,
What man is that singing?"
Román asks the woman
Now feeding her baby
With steaming ukhá.[1]

"A singer, my brothers,
A born Little Russian,
The Barin once brought him
Away from his home,
With a promise to send him
To Italy later.
But long the Pomyéshchick
Has been in strange parts
And forgotten his promise;
And now the poor fellow

[1] *Ukhá*—fish soup.

Would be but too glad
To get back to his village.
There's nothing to do here,
He hasn't a farthing,
There's nothing before him
And nothing behind him
Excepting his voice.
You have not really heard it;
You will if you stay here
Till sunrise to-morrow:
Some three versts away
There is living a deacon,
And he has a voice too.
They greet one another:
Each morning at sunrise
Will our little singer
Climb up to the watch-tower,
And call to the other,
'Good-morrow to Father
Ipát, and how fares he?'
(The windows all shake
At the sound.)
From the distance
The deacon will answer,
'Good-morrow, good-morrow,
To our little sweet-throat!
I go to drink vodka,
I'm going . . . I'm going. . . .'
The voice on the air
Will hang quivering around us
For more than an hour,
Like the neigh of a stallion."

The cattle are now
Coming home, and the evening

Is filled with the fragrance
Of milk; and the woman,
The mother of Mítyenka,
Sighs; she is thinking,
"If only one cow
Would turn into the courtyard!"
But hark! In the distance
Some voices in chorus!
"Good-bye, you poor mourners,
May God send you comfort!
The people are coming,
We're going to meet them."

The peasants are filled
With relief; because after
The whining old servants
The people who meet them
Returning from work
In the fields seem such healthy
And beautiful people.
The men and the women
And pretty young girls
Are all singing together.

"Good health to you! Which is
Among you the woman
Matróna Korchágin?"
The peasants demand.

"And what do you want
With Matróna Korchágin?"

The woman Matróna
Is tall, finely moulded,
Majestic in bearing,
And strikingly handsome.
Of thirty-eight years

She appears, and her black hair
Is mingled with grey.
Her complexion is swarthy,
Her eyes large and dark
And severe, with rich lashes.
A white shirt, and short
Sarafán [1] she is wearing,
She walks with a hay-fork
Slung over her shoulder.

"Well, what do you want
With Matróna Korchágin?"
The peasants are silent;
They wait till the others
Have gone in advance,
And then, bowing, they answer:

"We come from afar,
And a trouble torments us,
A trouble so great
That for it we've forsaken
Our homes and our work,
And our appetites fail.
We're orthodox peasants,
From District 'Most Wretched,'
From 'Destitute Parish,'
From neighbouring hamlets—
'Patched,' 'Barefoot,' and 'Shabby,'
'Bleak,' 'Burnt-Out,' and 'Hungry,'
And 'Harvestless,' too.
We met in the roadway
And argued about
Who is happy in Russia.
Luká said, 'The pope,'

[1] A national loose sleeveless dress worn with a separate shirt or blouse.

And Demyán, 'The Pomyéshchick,'
And Prov said, 'The Tsar,'
And Román, 'The official.'
'The round-bellied merchant,'
Said both brothers Goóbin,
Mitródor and Ívan.
Pakhóm said, 'His Highness,
The Tsar's Chief Adviser.'
Like bulls are the peasants:
Once folly is in them
You cannot dislodge it
Although you should beat them
With stout wooden cudgels,
They stick to their folly
And nothing will move them.
We argued and quarrelled,
While quarrelling fought,
And while fighting decided
That never again
Would we turn our steps homewards
To kiss wives and children,
To see the old people,
Until we have found
The reply to our question,
Of who can in Russia
Be happy and free?
We've questioned the pope,
We've asked the Pomyéshchick,
And now we ask you.
We'll seek the official,
The Minister, merchant,
We even will go
To the Tsar—Little Father,
Though whether he'll see us
We cannot be sure.

But rumour has told us
That *you're* free and happy.
Then say, in God's name,
If the rumour be true."

Matróna Korchágin
Does not seem astonished,
But only a sad look
Creeps into her eyes,
And her face becomes thoughtful.

"Your errand is surely
A foolish one, brothers,"
She says to the peasants,
"For this is the season
Of work, and no peasant
For chatter has time."

"Till now on our journey
Throughout half the Empire
We've met no denial,"
The peasants protest.

"But look for yourselves, now,
The corn-ears are bursting.
We've not enough hands."

"And we? What are we for?
Just give us some sickles,
And see if we don't
Get some work done to-morrow!"
The peasants reply.

Matróna sees clearly
Enough that this offer
Must not be rejected;

" Agreed," she said, smiling,
" To such lusty fellows
As you, we may well look
For ten sheaves apiece."

" You give us your promise
To open your heart to us ? "

" I will hide nothing."

Matróna Korchágin
Now enters her cottage,
And while she is working
Within it, the peasants
Discover a very
Nice spot just behind it,
And sit themselves down.
There's a barn close beside them
And two immense haystacks,
A flax-field around them ;
And lying just near them
A fine plot of turnips,
And spreading above them
A wonderful oak-tree,
A king among oaks.
They're sitting beneath it,
And now they're producing
The magic white napkin :
" Heh, napkin enchanted,
Give food to the peasants ! "
The napkin unfolds,
Two hands have come floating
From no one sees where,
Place a pailful of vodka,
A large pile of bread

On the magic white napkin,
And dwindle away.
The two brothers Goóbin
Are chuckling together,
For they have just pilfered
A very big horse-radish
Out of the garden—
It's really a monster!

The skies are dark blue now,
The bright stars are twinkling,
The moon has arisen
And sails high above them;
The woman Matróna
Comes out of the cottage
To tell them her tale.

CHAPTER I

THE WEDDING

"My girlhood was happy,
For we were a thrifty
And diligent household;
And I, the young maiden,
With Father and Mother
Knew nothing but joy.
My father got up
And went out before sunrise,
He woke me with kisses
And tender caresses;
My brother, while dressing,
Would sing little verses:

'Get up, little Sister,
Get up, little Sister,
In no little beds now
Are people delaying,
In all little churches
The peasants are praying,
Get up, now, get up,
It is time, little Sister.
The shepherd has gone
To the field with the sheep,
And no little maidens
Are lying asleep,
They've gone to pick raspberries,
Merrily singing.
The sound of the axe
In the forest is ringing.'

"And then my dear mother,
When she had done scouring
The pots and the pans,
When the hut was put tidy,
The bread in the oven,
Would steal to my bedside,
And cover me softly
And whisper to me:

"'Sleep on, little dove,
Gather strength—you will need it—
You will not stay always
With Father and Mother,
And when you will leave them
To live among strangers
Not long will you sleep.
You'll slave till past midnight,
And rise before daybreak;

You'll always be weary.
They'll give you a basket
And throw at the bottom
A crust. You will chew it,
My poor little dove,
And start working again. . . .'

"But, brothers, I did not
Spend much time in sleeping;
And when I was five
On the day of St. Simon,
I mounted a horse
With the help of my father,
And then was no longer
A child. And at six years
I carried my father
His breakfast already,
And tended the ducks,
And at night brought the cow home,
And next—took my rake,
And was off to the hayfields!
And so by degrees
I became a great worker,
And yet best of all
I loved singing and dancing;
The whole day I worked
In the fields, and at nightfall
Returned to the cottage
All covered with grime.
But what's the hot bath for?
And thanks to the bath
And boughs of the birch-tree,
And icy spring water,
Again I was clean
And refreshed, and was ready

To take out my spinning-wheel,
And with companions
To sing half the night.

"I never ran after
The youths, and the forward
I checked very sharply.
To those who were gentle
And shy, I would whisper:
'My cheeks will grow hot,
And sharp eyes has my mother;
Be wise, now, and leave me
Alone'—and they left me.

"No matter how clever
I was to avoid them,
The one came at last
I was destined to wed;
And he—to my bitter
Regret—was a stranger:
Young Phílip Korchágin,
A builder of ovens.
He came from St. Petersburg.
Oh, how my mother
Did weep: 'Like a fish
In the ocean, my daughter,
You'll plunge and be lost;
Like a nightingale, straying
Away from its nest,
We shall lose you, my daughter!
The walls of the stranger
Are not built of sugar,
Are not spread with honey,
Their dwellings are chilly
And garnished with hunger;

The cold winds will nip you,
The black rooks will scold you,
The savage dogs bite you,
The strangers despise you.'

"But Father sat talking
And drinking till late
With the 'swat.'[1] I was frightened,
I slept not all night. . . .

"Oh, youth, pray you, tell me,
Now what can you find
In the maiden to please you?
And where have you seen her?
Perhaps in the sledges
With merry young friends
Flying down from the mountain?
Then you were mistaken,
O son of your father,
It was but the frost
And the speed and the laughter
That brought the bright tints
To the cheeks of the maiden.
Perhaps at some feast
In the home of a neighbour
You saw her rejoicing
And clad in bright colours?
But then she was plump
From her rest in the winter;
Her rosy face bloomed
Like the scarlet-hued poppy;
But wait!—have you been
To the hut of her father
And seen her at work
Beating flax in the barn?

[1] The marriage agent.

Ah, what shall I do ?
I will take brother falcon
And send him to town :
' Fly to town, brother falcon,
And bring me some cloth
And six colours of worsted,
And tassels of blue.
I will make a fine curtain,
Embroider each corner
With Tsar and Tsaritsa,
With Moscow and Kiev,
And Constantinople,
And set the great sun
Shining bright in the middle,
And this I will hang
In the front of my window :
Perhaps you will see it,
And, struck by its beauty,
Will stand and admire it,
And will not remember
To seek for the maiden.' . . .

" And so till the morning
I lay with such thoughts.
' Now, leave me, young fellow,'
I said to the youth
When he came in the evening ;
' I will not be foolish
Enough to abandon
My freedom in order
To enter your service.
God sees me—I will not
Depart from my home ! '

" ' Do come,' said young Philip,
' So far have I travelled

To fetch you. Don't fear me—
I will not ill-treat you.'
I begged him to leave me,
I wept and lamented ;
But nevertheless
I was still a young maiden :
I did not forget
Sidelong glances to cast
At the youth who thus wooed me.
And Phílip was handsome,
Was rosy and lusty,
Was strong and broad-shouldered,
With fair curling hair,
With a voice low and tender. . . .
Ah, well . . . I was won. . . .

" ' Come here, pretty fellow,
And stand up against me,
Look deep in my eyes—
They are clear eyes and truthful;
Look well at my rosy
Young face, and bethink you :
Will you not regret it,
Won't my heart be broken,
And shall I not weep
Day and night if I trust you
And go with you, leaving
My parents for ever ? '

" ' Don't fear, little pigeon,
We shall not regret it,'
Said Phílip, but still
I was timid and doubtful.
' Do go,' murmured I, and he,
' When you come with me.'

Of course I was fairer
And sweeter and dearer
Than any that lived,
And his arms were about me. . . .
Then all of a sudden
I made a sharp effort
To wrench myself free.
'How now? What's the matter?
You're strong, little pigeon!'
Said Phílip astonished,
But still held me tight.
'Ah, Phílip, if you had
Not held me so firmly
You would not have won me;
I did it to try you,
To measure your strength;
You were strong, and it pleased me.'
We must have been happy
In those fleeting moments
When softly we whispered
And argued together;
I think that we never
Were happy again. . . .

"How well I remember. . . .
The night was like this night,
Was starlit and silent . . .
Was dreamy and tender
Like this. . . ."

And the woman,
Matróna, sighed deeply,
And softly began—
Leaning back on the haystack—
To sing to herself
With her thoughts in the past:

" ' Tell me, young merchant, pray,
Why do you love me so—
Poor peasant's daughter ?
I am not clad in gold,
I am not hung with pearls,
Not decked with silver.'

" ' Silver your chastity,
Golden your beauty shines,
O my belovèd,
White pearls are falling now
Out of your weeping eyes,
Falling like tear-drops.'

" My father gave orders
To bring forth the wine-cups,
To set them all out
On the solid oak table.
My dear mother blessed me :
' Go, serve them, my daughter,
Bow low to the strangers.'
I bowed for the first time,
My knees shook and trembled ;
I bowed for the second—
My face had turned white ;
And then for the third time
I bowed, and forever
The freedom of girlhood
Rolled down from my head. . . ."

" Ah, that means a wedding,"
Cry both brothers Goóbin,
" Let's drink to the health
Of the happy young pair ! "

" Well said ! We'll begin
With the bride," say the others.

" Will you drink some vodka,
Matróna Korchágin ? "

" An old woman, brothers,
And not drink some vodka ? "

CHAPTER II

A SONG

Stand before your judge—
And your legs will quake !
Stand before the priest
On your wedding-day,—
How your head will ache !
How your head will ache !
You will call to mind
Songs of long ago,
Songs of gloom and woe :
Telling how the guests
Crowd into the yard,
Run to see the bride
Whom the husband brings
Homeward at his side.
How his parents both
Fling themselves on her ;
How his brothers soon
Call her " wasteful one " ;
How his sisters next
Call her " giddy one " ;
How his father growls,
" Greedy little bear ! "
How his mother snarls,
" Cannibal ! " at her.

She is " slovenly "
And " disorderly,"
She's a " wicked one " !

" All that's in the song
Happened now to me.
Do you know the song ?
Have you heard it sung ? "

" Yes, we know it well ;
Gossip, you begin,
We will all join in."

Matróna

So sleepy, so weary
I am, and my heavy head
Clings to the pillow.
But out in the passage
My Father-in-law
Begins stamping and swearing.

Peasants in Chorus

Stamping and swearing !
Stamping and swearing !
He won't let the poor woman
Rest for a moment.
Up, up, up, lazy-head !
Up, up, up, lie-abed !
Lazy-head !
Lie-abed !
Slut !

Matróna

So sleepy, so weary
I am, and my heavy head
Clings to the pillow ;

But out in the passage
My Mother-in-law
Begins scolding and nagging.

Peasants in Chorus

Scolding and nagging !
Scolding and nagging !
She won't let the poor woman
Rest for a moment.
Up, up, up, lazy-head !
Up, up, up, lie-abed !
Lazy-head !
Lie-abed !
Slut !

" A quarrelsome household
It was—that of Phílip's
To which I belonged now ;
And I from my girlhood
Stepped straight into Hell.
My husband departed
To work in the city,
And leaving, advised me
To work and be silent,
To yield and be patient :
' Don't splash the red iron
With cold water—it hisses ! '
With father and mother
And sisters-in-law he
Now left me alone ;
Not a soul was among them
To love or to shield me,
But many to scold.
One sister-in-law—
It was Martha, the eldest,—

Soon set me to work
  Like a slave for her pleasure.
And Father-in-law too
  One had to look after,
Or else all his clothes
  To redeem from the tavern.
In all that one did
  There was need to be careful,
Or Mother-in-law's
  Superstitions were troubled
(One never could please her).
Well, some superstitions
  Of course may be right;
But they're most of them evil.
  And one day it happened
That Mother-in-law
  Murmured low to her husband
That corn which is stolen
  Grows faster and better.
So Father-in-law
  Stole away after midnight. . . .
It chanced he was caught,
  And at daybreak next morning
Brought back and flung down
  Like a log in the stable.

"But I acted always
As Phílip had told me:
  I worked, with the anger
Hid deep in my bosom,
  And never a murmur
Allowed to escape me.
  And then with the winter
Came Phílip, and brought me
  A pretty silk scarf;

And one feast-day he took me
To drive in the sledges ;
And quickly my sorrows
Were lost and forgotten :
I sang as in old days
At home, with my father.
For I and my husband
Were both of an age,
And were happy together
When only they left us
Alone, but remember
A husband like Phílip
Not often is found."

" Do you mean to say
That he never once beat you ? "

Matróna was plainly
Confused by the question ;
" Once, only, he beat me,"
She said, very low.

" And why ? " asked the peasants.

" Well, you know yourselves, friends,
How quarrels arise
In the homes of the peasants.
A young married sister
Of Phílip's one day
Came to visit her parents.
She found she had holes
In her boots, and it vexed her.
Then Phílip said, ' Wife,
Fetch some boots for my sister.'
And I did not answer
At once ; I was lifting

A large wooden tub,
So, of course, couldn't speak.
But Philip was angry
With me, and he waited
Until I had hoisted
The tub to the oven,
Then struck me a blow
With his fist, on my temple.

" 'We're glad that you came,
But you see that you'd better
Keep out of the way,'
Said the other young sister
To her that was married.

" Again Philip struck me !

" 'It's long since I've seen you,
My dearly-loved daughter,
But could I have known
How the baggage would treat you . . . !'
Whined Mother-in-law.

" And again Philip struck me !

" Well, that is the story.
'Tis surely not fitting
For wives to sit counting
The blows of their husbands,
But then I had promised
To keep nothing back."

" Ah, well, with these women—
The poisonous serpents !—
A corpse would awaken
And snatch up a horsewhip,"
The peasants say, smiling.

Matróna said nothing.
The peasants, in order
To keep the occasion
In manner befitting,
Are filling the glasses;
And now they are singing
In voices of thunder
A rollicking chorus,
Of husbands' relations,
And wielding the knout.

* * *

"Cruel hated husband,
Hark! he is coming!
Holding the knout. . . .

Chorus

"Hear the lash whistle!
See the blood spurt!
Ai, leli, leli!
See the blood spurt!

* * *

"Run to his father!
Bowing before him—
'Save me!' I beg him;
'Stop my fierce husband—
Venomous serpent!'
Father-in-law says,
'Beat her more soundly!
Draw the blood freely!'

Chorus

"Hear the lash whistle!
See the blood spurt!
Ai, leli, leli!
See the blood spurt!

* * *

"Quick—to his mother!
Bowing before her—
'Save me!' I beg her;
'Stop my cruel husband!
Venomous serpent!'
Mother-in-law says,
'Beat her more soundly,
Draw the blood freely!'

Chorus

"Hear the lash whistle!
See the blood spurt!
Ai, leli, leli!
See the blood spurt!"

"On Lady-day Phílip
Went back to the city;
A little while later
Our baby was born.
Like a bright-coloured picture
Was he—little Djóma;
The sunbeams had given
Their radiance to him,
The pure snow its whiteness;
The poppies had painted
His lips; by the sable
His brow had been pencilled;
The falcon had fashioned
His eyes, and had lent them
Their wonderful brightness.
At sight of his first
Angel smile, all the anger
And bitterness nursed
In my bosom was melted;
It vanished away

Like the snow on the meadows
At sight of the smiling
Spring sun. And not longer
I worried and fretted;
I worked, and in silence
I let them upbraid.
But soon after that
A misfortune befell me:
The manager by
The Pomyéshchick appointed,
Called Sitnikov, hotly
Began to pursue me.
'My lovely Tsaritsa!
'My rosy-ripe berry!'
Said he; and I answered,
'Be off, shameless rascal!
Remember, the berry
Is not in *your* forest!'
I stayed from the field-work,
And hid in the cottage;
He very soon found me.
I hid in the corn-loft,
But Mother-in-law
Dragged me out to the courtyard;
'Now don't play with fire, girl!'
She said. I besought her
To send him away,
But she answered me roughly,
'And do you want Phílip
To serve as a soldier?'
I ran to Savyéli,
The grandfather, begging
His aid and advice.
"I haven't yet told you
A word of Savyéli,

The only one living
Of Phílip's relations
Who pitied and loved me.
Say, friends, shall I tell you
About him as well ? "

" Yes, tell us his tale,
And we'll each throw a couple
Of sheaves in to-morrow,
Above what we promised."

" Well, well," says Matróna,
" And 'twould be a pity
To give old Savyéli
No place in the story ;
For he was a happy one,
Too—the old man. . . ."

CHAPTER III

SAVYÉLI

" A mane grey and bushy
Which covered his shoulders,
A huge grizzled beard
Which had not seen the scissors
For twenty odd years,
Made Savyéli resemble
A shaggy old bear,
Especially when he
Came out of the forest,
So broad and bent double.
The grandfather's shoulders

Were bowed very low,
And at first I was frightened
Whenever he entered
The tiny low cottage :
I thought that were he
To stand straight of a sudden
He'd knock a great hole
With his head in the ceiling.
But Grandfather could not
Stand straight, and they told me
That he was a hundred.
He lived all alone
In his own little cottage,
And never permitted
The others to enter ;
He couldn't abide them.
Of course they were angry
And often abused him.
His own son would shout at him,
' Branded one ! Convict ! '
But this did not anger
Savyéli, he only
Would go to his cottage
Without making answer,
And, crossing himself,
Begin reading the scriptures ;
Then suddenly cry
In a voice loud and joyful,
' Though branded—no slave ! '
When too much they annoyed him,
He sometimes would say to them :
' Look, the swat's [1] coming ! '
The unmarried daughter
Would fly to the window ;

[1] The marriage agent.

Instead of the swat there
A beggar she'd find !
And one day he silvered
A common brass farthing,
And left it to lie
On the floor ; and then straightway
Did Father-in-law run
In joy to the tavern,—
He came back, not tipsy,
But beaten half-dead !
At supper that night
We were all very silent,
And Father-in-law had
A cut on his eyebrow,
But Grandfather's face
Wore a smile like a rainbow !

" Savyéli would gather
The berries and mushrooms
From spring till late autumn,
And snare the wild rabbits ;
Throughout the long winter
He lay on the oven
And talked to himself.
He had favourite sayings :
He used to lie thinking
For whole hours together,
And once in an hour
You would hear him exclaiming :

" ' Destroyed . . . and subjected ! '
Or, ' Ai, you toy heroes !
You're fit but for battles
With old men and women ! '

" ' Be patient . . . and perish,
Impatient . . . and perish ! '

" ' Eh, you Russian peasant,
You giant, you strong man,
The whole of your lifetime
You're flogged, yet you dare not
Take refuge in death,
For Hell's torments await you ! '

" ' At last the Korójins [1]
Awoke, and they paid him,
They paid him, they paid him,
They paid the whole debt ! '
And many such sayings
He had,—I forget them.
When Father-in-law grew
Too noisy I always
Would run to Savyéli,
And we two, together,
Would fasten the door.
Then I began working,
While Djómushka climbed
To the grandfather's shoulder,
And sat there, and looked
Like a bright little apple
That hung on a hoary
Old tree. Once I asked him :

" ' And why do they call you
A convict, Savyéli ? '

" ' I was once a convict,'
Said he.

[1] Inhabitants of the village Korojin.

"'You, Savyéli!'

"'Yes I, little Grandchild,
Yes, I have been branded.
I buried a German
Alive—Christian Vogel.'

"'You're joking, Savyéli!'

"'Oh no, I'm not joking.
I mean it,' he said,
And he told me the story.

"'The peasants in old days
Were serfs as they now are,
But our race had, somehow,
Not seen its Pomyéshchick;
No manager knew we,
No pert German agent.
And barschin we gave not,
And taxes we paid not
Except when it pleased us,—
Perhaps once in three years
Our taxes we'd pay.'

"'But why, little Grandad?'

"'The times were so blessed,—
And folk had a saying
That our little village
Was sought by the devil
For more than three years,
But he never could find it.
Great forests a thousand
Years old lay about us;

And treacherous marshes
And bogs spread around us ;
No horseman and few men
On foot ever reached us.
It happened that once
By some chance, our Pomyéshchick,
Shaláshnikov, wanted
To pay us a visit.
High placed in the army
Was he ; and he started
With soldiers to find us.
They soon got bewildered
And lost in the forest,
And had to turn back ;
Why, the Zemsky policeman
Would only come once
In a year ! They were good times !
In these days the Barin
Lives under your window ;
The roadways go spreading
Around, like white napkins—
The devil destroy them !
We only were troubled
By bears, and the bears too
Were easily managed.
Why, I was a worse foe
By far than old Mishka,
When armed with a dagger
And bear-spear. I wandered
In wild, secret woodpaths,
And shouted, " *My* forest ! "
And once, only once,
I was frightened by something :
I stepped on a huge
Female bear that was lying

Asleep in her den
In the heart of the forest.
She flung herself at me,
And straight on my bear-spear
Was fixed. Like a fowl
On the spit she hung twisting
An hour before death.
It was then that my spine snapped.
It often was painful
When I was a young man ;
But now I am old,
It is fixed and bent double.
Now, do I not look like
A hook, little Grandchild ? '

" ' But finish the story.
You lived and were not much
Afflicted. What further ? '

" ' At last our Pomyéshchick
Invented a new game :
He sent us an order,
" Appear ! " We appeared not.
Instead, we lay low
In our dens, hardly breathing.
A terrible drought
Had descended that summer,
The bogs were all dry ;
So he sent a policeman,
Who managed to reach us,
To gather our taxes,
In honey and fish ;
A second time came he,
We gave him some bear-skins ;
And when for the third time

He came, we gave nothing,—
  We said we had nothing.
We put on our laputs,
  We put our old caps on,
Our oldest old coats,
  And we went to Korójin
(For there was our master now,
  Stationed with soldiers).
" Your taxes ! " " We have none,
  We cannot pay taxes,
The corn has not grown,
  And the fish have escaped us."
" Your taxes ! " " We have none."
  He waited no longer;
" Hey ! Give them the first round ! "
  He said, and they flogged us.

" ' Our pockets were not
  Very easily opened ;
Shaláshnikov, though, was
  A master at flogging.
Our tongues became parched,
  And our brains were set whirling,
And still he continued.
  He flogged not with birch-rods,
With whips or with sticks,
  But with knouts made for giants.
At last we could stand it
  No longer ; we shouted,
" Enough ! Let us breathe ! "
  We unwound our foot-rags
And took out our money,
  And brought to the Barin
A ragged old bonnet
  With roubles half filled

" ' The Barin grew calm,
He was pleased with the money ;
He gave us a glass each
Of strong, bitter brandy,
And drank some himself
With the vanquished Korójins,
And gaily clinked glasses.
" It's well that you yielded,"
Said he, " For I swear
I was fully decided
To strip off the last shred
Of skins from your bodies
And use it for making
A drum for my soldiers !
Ha, ha ! Ha, ha, ha ! "
(He was pleased with the notion.)
" A fine drum indeed ! "

" ' In silence we left ;
But two stalwart old peasants
Were chuckling together ;
They'd two hundred roubles
In notes, the old rascals !
Safe hidden away
In the end of their coat-tails.
They both had been yelling,
" We're beggars ! We're beggars ! "
So carried them home.
" Well, well, you may cackle ! "
I thought to myself,
" But the next time, be certain,
You won't laugh at me ! "
The others were also
Ashamed of their weakness,
And so by the ikons

We swore all together
That next time we rather
Would die of the beating
Than feebly give way.
It seems the Pomyéshchick
Had taken a fancy
At once to our roubles,
Because after that
Every year we were summoned
To go to Korójin,
We went, and were flogged.

" ' Shaláshnikov flogged like
A prince, but be certain
The treasures he thrashed from
The doughty Korójins
Were not of much weight.
The weak yielded soon,
But the strong stood like iron
For the commune. I also
Bore up, and I thought:
" Though never so stoutly
You flog us, you dog's son,
You won't drag the whole soul
From out of the peasant;
Some trace will be left."

" ' When the Barin was sated
We went from the town,
But we stopped on the outskirts
To share what was over.
And plenty there was, too!
Shaláshnikov, heh,
You're a fool! It was our turn
To laugh at the Barin;
Ah, they were proud peasants—

The plucky Korójins !
But nowadays show them
The tail of a knout,
And they'll fly to the Barin,
And beg him to take
The last coin from their pockets.
Well, that's why we all lived
Like merchants in those days.
One summer came tidings
To us that our Barin
Now owned us no longer,
That he had, at Varna,
Been killed. We weren't sorry,
But somehow we thought then :
" The peasants' good fortune
Has come to an end ! "
The heir made a new move :
He sent us a German.[1]
Through vast, savage forests,
Through sly sucking bogs
And on foot came the German,
As bare as a finger.

" ' As melting as butter
At first was the German :
" Just give what you can, then,"
He'd say to the peasants.

" : " We've nothing to give ! "

" ' " I'll explain to the Barin."

" ' " Explain," we replied,
And were troubled no more.

[1] Germans were often employed as managers of the Pomyéshchicks' estates.

It seemed he was going
To live in the village;
He soon settled down.
On the banks of the river,
For hour after hour
He sat peacefully fishing,
And striking his nose
Or his cheek or his forehead.
We laughed: "You don't like
The Korójin mosquitoes?"
He'd boat near the bankside
And shout with enjoyment,
Like one in the bath-house
Who's got to the roof.[1]

"'With youths and young maidens
He strolled in the forest
(They were not for nothing
Those strolls in the forest!)—
"Well, if you can't pay
You should work, little peasants."

"'"What work should we do?"

"'"You should dig some deep ditches
To drain off the bog-lands."
We dug some deep ditches.

"'"And now trim the forest."

"'"Well, well, trim the forest. . . ."
We hacked and we hewed
As the German directed,
And when we look round
There's a road through the forest!

[1] In Russian vapour-baths there are shelves ranged round the walls for the bathers to recline upon. The higher the shelf the hotter the atmosphere.

" ' The German went driving
To town with three horses ;
Look ! now he is coming
With boxes and bedding,
And God knows wherefrom
Has this bare-footed German
Raised wife and small children !
And now he's established
A village ispravnik,[1]
They live like two brothers.
His courtyard at all times
Is teeming with strangers,
And woe to the peasants—
The fallen Korójins !
He sucked us all dry
To the very last farthing ;
And flog !—like the soul
Of Shaláshnikov flogged he !
Shaláshnikov stopped
When he got what he wanted ;
He clung to our backs
Till he'd glutted his stomach,
And then he dropped down
Like a leech from a dog's ear.
But he had the grip
Of a corpse—had this German ;
Until he had left you
Stripped bare like a beggar
You couldn't escape.'

" ' But how could you bear it ? '

" ' Ah, how could we bear it ?
Because we were giants—
Because by their patience

[1] Police-official.

The people of Russia
  Are great, little Grandchild.
You think, then, Matróna,
  That we Russian peasants
No warriors are ?
  Why, truly the peasant
Does not live in armour,
  Does not die in warfare,
But nevertheless
  He's a warrior, child.
His hands are bound tight,
  And his feet hung with fetters ;
His back—mighty forests
  Have broken across it ;
His breast—I will tell you,
The Prophet Elíjah
  In chariot fiery
Is thundering within it ;
  And these things the peasant
Can suffer in patience.
  He bends—but he breaks not ;
He reels—but he falls not ;
  Then is he not truly
A warrior, say ? '

" ' You joke, little Grandad ;
Such warriors, surely,
  A tiny mouse nibbling
Could crumble to atoms,'
  I said to Savyéli.

" ' I know not, Matróna,
  But up till to-day
He has stood with his burden ;
  He's sunk in the earth

'Neath its weight to his shoulders ;
His face is not moistened
With sweat, but with heart's blood.
I don't know what may
Come to pass in the future,
I can't think what will
Come to pass—only God knows.
For my part, I know
When the storm howls in winter,
When old bones are painful,
I lie on the oven,
I lie, and am thinking :
" Eh, you, strength of giants,
On what have they spent you ?
On what are you wasted ?
With whips and with rods
They will pound you to dust ! " '

" ' But what of the German,
Savyéli ? '

" ' The German ?
Well, well, though he lived
Like a lord in his glory
For eighteen long years,
We were waiting our day.
Then the German considered
A factory needful,
And wanted a pit dug.
'Twas work for nine peasants.
We started at daybreak
And laboured till mid-day,
And then we were going
To rest and have dinner,
When up comes the German :

" Eh, you, lazy devils !
So little work done ? "
He started to nag us,
Quite coolly and slowly,
Without heat or hurry;
For that was his way.

" ' And we, tired and hungry,
Stood listening in silence.
He kicked the wet earth
With his boot while he scolded,
Not far from the edge
Of the pit. I stood near him,
And happened to give him
A push with my shoulder;
Then somehow a second
And third pushed him gently. . . .
We spoke not a word,
Gave no sign to each other,
But silently, slowly,
Drew closer together,
And edging the German
Respectfully forward,
We brought him at last
To the brink of the hollow. . . .
He tumbled in headlong !
" A ladder ! " he bellows;
Nine shovels reply.
" Naddai ! " [1]—the word fell
From my lips on the instant,
The word to which people
Work gaily in Russia;
" Naddai ! " and " Naddai ! "
And we laboured so bravely

[1] Heave-to !

That soon not a trace
  Of the pit was remaining,
  The earth was as smooth
As before we had touched it;
  And then we stopped short
And we looked at each other. . . .'

"The old man was silent.
'What further, Savyéli?'

"'What further? Ah, bad times:
The prison in Buy-Town
  (I learnt there my letters),
Until we were sentenced;
  The convict-mines later;
And plenty of lashes.
  But I never frowned
At the lash in the prison;
  They flogged us but poorly.
And later I nearly
  Escaped to the forest;
They caught me, however.
  Of course they did not
Pat my head for their trouble;
  The Governor was through
Siberia famous
  For flogging. But had not
Shaláshnikov flogged us?
  I spit at the floggings
I got in the prison!
  Ah, he was a Master!
He knew how to flog you!
  He toughened my hide so
You see it has served me
  For one hundred years,

And 'twill serve me another.
But life was not easy,
I tell you, Matróna:
First twenty years prison,
Then twenty years exile.
I saved up some money,
And when I came home,
Built this hut for myself.
And here I have lived
For a great many years now.
They loved the old grandad
So long as he'd money,
But now it has gone
They would part with him gladly,
They spit in his face.
Eh, you plucky toy heroes!
You're fit to make war
Upon old men and women!'

"And that was as much
As the grandfather told me."

"And now for your story,"
They answer Matróna.

"'Tis not very bright.
From one trouble God
In His goodness preserved me;
For Sitnikov died
Of the cholera. Soon, though,
Another arose,
I will tell you about it."

"Naddai!" say the peasants
(They love the word well),
They are filling the glasses.

CHAPTER IV

DJÓMUSHKA

"The little tree burns
For the lightning has struck it.
The nightingale's nest
Has been built in its branches.
The little tree burns,
It is sighing and groaning;
The nightingale's children
Are crying and calling:
'Oh, come, little Mother!
Oh, come, little Mother!
Take care of us, Mother,
Until we can fly,
Till our wings have grown stronger,
Until we can fly
To the peaceful green forest,
Until we can fly
To the far silent valleys. . . .'
The poor little tree—
It is burnt to grey ashes;
The poor little fledgelings
Are burnt to grey ashes.
The mother flies home,
But the tree . . . and the fledgelings . . .
The nest. . . . She is calling,
Lamenting and calling;
She circles around,
She is sobbing and moaning;
She circles so quickly,
She circles so quickly,
Her tiny wings whistle.
The dark night has fallen,

The dark world is silent,
  But one little creature
Is helplessly grieving
  And cannot find comfort;—
The nightingale only
  Laments for her children. . . .
She never will see them
  Again, though she call them
Till breaks the white day. . . .
I carried my baby
  Asleep in my bosom
To work in the meadows.
  But Mother-in-law cried,
'Come, leave him behind you,
  At home with Savyéli,
You'll work better then.'
  And I was so timid,
So tired of her scolding,
  I left him behind.

"That year it so happened
  The harvest was richer
Than ever we'd known it;
  The reaping was hard,
But the reapers were merry,
  I sang as I mounted
The sheaves on the waggon.
  (The waggons are loaded
To laughter and singing;
  The sledges in silence,
With thoughts sad and bitter;
  The waggons convey the corn
Home to the peasants,
  The sledges will bear it
  Away to the market.)

"But as I was working
I heard of a sudden
A deep groan of anguish:
I saw old Savyéli
Creep trembling towards me,
His face white as death:
'Forgive me, Matróna!
Forgive me, Matróna!
I sinned. . . . I was careless.'
He fell at my feet.

"Oh, stay, little swallow!
Your nest build not there!
Not there 'neath the leafless
Bare bank of the river:
The water will rise,
And your children will perish.
Oh, poor little woman,
Young wife and young mother,
The daughter-in-law
And the slave of the household,
Bear blows and abuse,
Suffer all things in silence,
But let not your baby
Be torn from your bosom. . . .
Savyéli had fallen
Asleep in the sunshine,
And Djóma—the pigs
Had attacked him and killed him.

"I fell to the ground
And lay writhing in torture;
I bit the black earth
And I shrieked in wild anguish;

I called on his name,
And I thought in my madness
My voice must awake him. . . .

"Hark!—horses' hoofs stamping,[1]
And harness-bells jangling—
Another misfortune!
The children are frightened,
They run to the houses;
And outside the window
The old men and women
Are talking in whispers
And nodding together.
The Elder is running
And tapping each window
In turn with his staff;
Then he runs to the hayfields,
He runs to the pastures,
To summon the people.
They come, full of sorrow—
Another misfortune!
And God in His wrath
Has sent guests that are hateful,
Has sent unjust judges.
Perhaps they want money?
Their coats are worn threadbare?
Perhaps they are hungry?

"Without greeting Christ
They sit down at the table,

[1] This paragraph refers to the custom of the country police in Russia, who, on hearing of the accidental death of anybody in a village, will, in order to extract bribes from the villagers, threaten to hold an inquest on the corpse. The peasants are usually ready to part with nearly all they possess in order to save their dead from what they consider desecration.

They've set up an icon
And cross in the middle ;
Our pope, Father John,
Swears the witnesses singly.

" They question Savyéli,
And then a policeman
Is sent to find me,
While the officer, swearing,
Is striding about
Like a beast in the forest. . . .
' Now, woman, confess it,'
He cries when I enter,
' You lived with the peasant
Savyéli in sin ? '

" I whisper in answer,
' Kind sir, you are joking.
I am to my husband
A wife without stain,
And the peasant Savyéli
Is more than a hundred
Years old ;—you can see it.'

" He's stamping about
Like a horse in the stable ;
In fury he's thumping
His fist on the table.
' Be silent ! Confess, then,
That you with Savyéli
Had plotted to murder
Your child ! '

" Holy Mother !
What horrible ravings !

My God, give me patience,
And let me not strangle
The wicked blasphemer!
I looked at the doctor
And shuddered in terror:
Before him lay lancets,
Sharp scissors, and knives.
I conquered myself,
For I knew why they lay there.
I answer him trembling,
'I loved little Djóma,
I would not have harmed him.'

"'And did you not poison him.
Give him some powder?'

"'Oh, Heaven forbid!'
I kneel to him crying,
'Be gentle! Have mercy!
And grant that my baby
In honour be buried,
Forbid them to thrust
The cruel knives in his body!
Oh, I am his mother!'

"Can anything move them?
No hearts they possess,
In their eyes is no conscience,
No cross at their throats. . . .

"They have lifted the napkin
Which covered my baby;
His little white body
With scissors and lancets
They worry and torture. . .

The room has grown darker,
I'm struggling and screaming,
'You butchers! You fiends!
Not on earth, not on water,
And not on God's temple
My tears shall be showered;
But straight on the souls
Of my hellish tormentors!
Oh, hear me, just God!
May Thy curse fall and strike them!
Ordain that their garments
May rot on their bodies!
Their eyes be struck blind,
And their brains scorch in madness!
Their wives be unfaithful,
Their children be crippled!
Oh, hear me, just God!
Hear the prayers of a mother,
And look on her tears,—
Strike these pitiless devils!'

"'She's crazy, the woman!'
The officer shouted,
'Why did you not tell us
Before? Stop this fooling!
Or else I shall order
My men, here, to bind you.'

"I sank on the bench,
I was trembling all over;
I shook like a leaf
As I gazed at the doctor;
His sleeves were rolled backwards,
A knife was in one hand,
A cloth in the other,
And blood was upon it;

His glasses were fixed
  On his nose. All was silent.
The officer's pen
  Began scratching on paper;
The motionless peasants
  Stood gloomy and mournful;
The pope lit his pipe
  And sat watching the doctor.
He said, 'You are reading
  A heart with a knife.'
I started up wildly;
  I knew that the doctor
Was piercing the heart
  Of my little dead baby.

"'Now, bind her, the vixen!'
The officer shouted;—
  'She's mad!' He began
To inquire of the peasants,
  'Have none of you noticed
Before that the woman
  Korchágin is crazy?'

"'No,' answered the peasants.
  And then Phílip's parents
He asked, and their children;
  They answered, 'Oh, no, sir!
We never remarked it.'
  He asked old Savyéli,—
'There's one thing,' he answered,
  'That might make one think
That Matróna is crazy:
  She's come here this morning
Without bringing with her
  A present of money
Or cloth to appease you.'

" And then the old man
Began bitterly crying.
The officer frowning
Sat down and said nothing.
And then I remembered :
In truth it was madness—
The piece of new linen
Which I had made ready
Was still in my box—
I'd forgotten to bring it ;
And now I had seen them
Seize Djómushka's body
And tear it to pieces.
I think at that moment
I turned into marble :
I watched while the doctor
Was drinking some vodka
And washing his hands ;
I saw how he offered
The glass to the pope,
And I heard the pope answer,
' Why ask me ? We mortals
Are pitiful sinners,—
We don't need much urging
To empty a glass ! '

" The peasants are standing
In fear, and are thinking :
' Now, how did these vultures
Get wind of the matter ?
Who told them that here
There was chance of some profit ?
They dashed in like wolves,
Seized the beards of the peasants,
And snarled in their faces
Like savage hyenas ! '

"And now they are feasting,
Are eating and drinking;
They chat with the pope,
He is murmuring to them,
'The people in these parts
Are beggars and drunken;
They owe me for countless
Confessions and weddings;
They'll take their last farthing
To spend in the tavern;
And nothing but sins
Do they bring to their priest.'

"And then I hear singing
In clear, girlish voices—
I know them all well:
There's Natásha and Glásha,
And Dáriushka,—Jesus
Have mercy upon them!
Hark! steps and accordion;
Then there is silence.
I think I had fallen
Asleep; then I fancied
That somebody entering
Bent over me, saying,
'Sleep, woman of sorrows,
Exhausted by sorrow,'
And making the sign
Of the cross on my forehead.
I felt that the ropes
On my body were loosened,
And then I remembered
No more. In black darkness
I woke, and astonished
I ran to the window:

Deep night lay around me—
What's happened? Where am I?
I ran to the street,—
It was empty, in Heaven
No moon and no stars,
And a great cloud of darkness
Spread over the village.
The huts of the peasants
Were dark; only one hut
Was brilliantly lighted,
It shone like a palace—
The hut of Savyéli.
I ran to the doorway,
And then . . . I remembered.

"The table was gleaming
With yellow wax candles,
And there, in the midst,
Lay a tiny white coffin,
And over it spread
Was a fine coloured napkin,
An icon was placed
At its head. . . .
O you builders,
For my little son
What a house you have fashioned!
No windows you've made
That the sunshine may enter,
No stove and no bench,
And no soft little pillows. . . .
Oh, Djómushka will not
Feel happy within it,
He cannot sleep well. . . .
'Begone!'—I cried harshly
On seeing Savyéli;

He stood near the coffin
And read from the book
In his hand, through his glasses.
I cursed old Savyéli,
Cried—' Branded one ! Convict !
Begone ! 'Twas you killed him !
You murdered my Djóma,
Begone from my sight ! '

" He stood without moving ;
He crossed himself thrice
And continued his reading.
But when I grew calmer
Savyéli approached me,
And said to me gently,
' In winter, Matróna,
I told you my story,
But yet there was more.
Our forests were endless,
Our lakes wild and lonely,
Our people were savage ;
By cruelty lived we :
By snaring the wood-grouse,
By slaying the bears :—
You must kill or you perish !
I've told you of Barin
Shaláshnikov, also
Of how we were robbed
By the villainous German,
And then of the prison,
The exile, the mines.
My heart was like stone,
I grew wild and ferocious,
My winter had lasted
A century, Grandchild,

But your little Djóma
  Had melted its frosts.
One day as I rocked him
  He smiled of a sudden,
And I smiled in answer. . . .
  A strange thing befell me
Some days after that :
  As I prowled in the forest
I aimed at a squirrel ;
  But suddenly noticed
How happy and playful
  It was, in the branches :
Its bright little face
  With its paw it sat washing.
I lowered my gun :—
  " You shall live, little squirrel ! "
I rambled about
  In the woods, in the meadows,
And each tiny floweret
  I loved. I went home then
And nursed little Djóma,
  And played with him, laughing.
God knows how I loved him,
  The innocent babe !
And now . . . through my folly,
  My sin, . . . he has perished. . . .
Upbraid me and kill me,
  But nothing can help you,
With God one can't argue. . . .
  Stand up now, Matróna,
And pray for your baby ;
  God acted with reason :
He's counted the joys
  In the life of a peasant ! '

"Long, long did Savyéli
Stand bitterly speaking,
The piteous fate
Of the peasant he painted;
And if a rich Barin,
A merchant or noble,
If even our Father
The Tsar had been listening,
Savyéli could not
Have found words which were truer,
Have spoken them better. . . .

"'Now Djóma is happy
And safe, in God's Heaven,'
He said to me later.
His tears began falling. . . .

"'I do not complain
That God took him, Savyéli,'
I said,—'but the insult
They did him torments me,
It's racking my heart.
Why did vicious black ravens
Alight on his body
And tear it to pieces?
Will neither our God
Nor our Tsar—Little Father—
Arise to defend us?'

"'But God, little Grandchild,
Is high, and the Tsar
Far away,' said Savyéli.

"I cried, 'Yet I'll reach them!'

" But Grandfather answered,
' Now hush, little Grandchild,
You woman of sorrow,
Bow down and have patience;
No truth you will find
In the world, and no justice.'

" ' But why then, Savyéli ? '

" ' A bondswoman, Grandchild,
You are; and for such
Is no hope,' said Savyéli.

" For long I sat darkly
And bitterly thinking.
The thunder pealed forth
And the windows were shaken;
I started! Savyéli
Drew nearer and touched me,
And led me to stand
By the little white coffin:

" ' Now pray that the Lord
May have placed little Djóma
Among the bright ranks
Of His angels,' he whispered;
A candle he placed
In my hand. . . . And I knelt there
The whole of the night
Till the pale dawn of daybreak:
The grandfather stood
Beside Djómushka's coffin
And read from the book
In a measured low voice. . . ."

CHAPTER V

THE SHE-WOLF

" 'Tis twenty years now
Since my Djóma was taken,
Was carried to sleep
'Neath his little grass blanket;
And still my heart bleeds,
And I pray for him always,
No apple till Spassa [1]
I touch with my lips. . . .

" For long I lay ill,
Not a word did I utter,
My eyes could not suffer
The old man, Savyéli.
No work did I do,
And my Father-in-law thought
To give me a lesson
And took down the horse-reins;
I bowed to his feet,
And cried—' Kill me! Oh, kill me!
I pray for the end!'
He hung the reins up, then.
I lived day and night
On the grave of my Djóma.
I dusted it clean
With a soft little napkin
That grass might grow green,
And I prayed for my lost one.
I yearned for my parents:
' Oh, you have forgotten,
Forgotten your daughter!'

[1] The Saviour's day.

" ' We have not forgotten
Our poor little daughter,
But is it worth while, say,
To wear the grey horse out
By such a long journey
To learn about your woes,
To tell you of ours ?
Since long, little daughter,
Would father and mother
Have journeyed to see you,
But ever the thought rose :
She'll weep at our coming,
She'll shriek when we leave ! '

In winter came Phílip,
Our sorrow together
We shared, and together
We fought with our grief
In the grandfather's hut."

" The grandfather died, then ? "

" Oh, no, in his cottage
For seven whole days
He lay still without speaking,
And then he got up
And he went to the forest ;
And there old Savyéli
So wept and lamented,
The woods were set throbbing.
In autumn he left us
And went as a pilgrim
On foot to do penance
At some distant convent. . . .

" I went with my husband
To visit my parents,

And then began working
Again. Three years followed,
Each week like the other,
As twin to twin brother,
And each year a child.
There was no time for thinking
And no time for grieving;
Praise God if you have time
For getting your work done
And crossing your forehead.
You eat—when there's something
Left over at table,
When elders have eaten,
When children have eaten;
You sleep—when you're ill. . . .

"In the fourth year came sorrow
Again; for when sorrow
Once lightens upon you
To death he pursues you;
He circles before you—
A bright shining falcon;
He hovers behind you—
An ugly black raven;
He flies in advance—
But he will not forsake you;
He lingers behind—
But he will not forget. . . .

"I lost my dear parents.
The dark nights alone knew
The grief of the orphan;
No need is there, brothers,
To tell you about it.
With tears did I water
The grave of my baby.

From far once I noticed
A wooden cross standing
Erect at its head,
And a little gilt icon ;
A figure is kneeling
Before it—' Savyéli !
From whence have you come ? '

" ' I have come from Pesótchna.
I've prayed for the soul
Of our dear little Djóma ;
I've prayed for the peasants
Of Russia. . . . Matróna,
Once more do I pray—
Oh, Matróna . . . Matróna. . . .
I pray that the heart
Of the mother, at last,
May be softened towards me. . . .
Forgive me, Matróna ! '

" ' Oh, long, long ago
I forgave you, Savyéli.'

" ' Then look at me now
As in old times, Matróna ! '

" I looked as of old.
Then up rose Savyéli,
And gazed in my eyes ;
He was trying to straighten
His stiffened old back ;
Like the snow was his hair now.
I kissed the old man,
And my new grief I told him ;
For long we sat weeping
And mourning together.
He did not live long

After that. In the autumn
A deep wound appeared
In his neck, and he sickened.
He died very hard.
For a hundred days, fully,
No food passed his lips;
To the bone he was shrunken.
He laughed at himself:
'Tell me, truly, Matróna,
Now am I not like
A Korójin mosquito?'

At times the old man
Would be gentle and patient;
At times he was angry
And nothing would please him;
He frightened us all
By his outbursts of fury:
'Eh, plough not, and sow not,
You downtrodden peasants!
You women, sit spinning
And weaving no longer!
However you struggle,
You fools, you must perish!
You will not escape
What by fate has been written!
Three roads are spread out
For the peasant to follow—
They lead to the tavern,
The mines, and the prison!
Three nooses are hung
For the women of Russia:
The one is of white silk,
The second of red silk,
The third is of black silk—

Choose that which you please ! '
And Grandfather laughed
In a manner which caused us
To tremble with fear
And draw nearer together. . . .
He died in the night,
And we did as he asked us :
We laid him to rest
In the grave beside Djóma.
The Grandfather lived
To a hundred and seven. . . .

" Four years passed away then,
The one like the other,
And I was submissive,
The slave of the household,
For Mother-in-law
And her husband the drunkard,
For Sister-in-law
By all suitors rejected.
I'd draw off their boots—
Only,—touch not my children !
For them I stood firm
Like a rock. Once it happened
A pilgrim arrived
At our village—a holy
And pious-tongued woman ;
She spoke to the people
Of how to please God
And of how to reach Heaven.
She said that on fast-days
No woman should offer
The breast to her child.
The women obeyed her :
On Wednesdays and Fridays

The village was filled
By the wailing of babies ;
And many a mother
Sat bitterly weeping
To hear her child cry
For its food—full of pity,
But fearing God's anger.
But I did not listen !
I said to myself
That if penance were needful
The mothers must suffer,
But not little children.
I said, ' I am guilty,
My God—not my children ! '

" It seems God was angry
And punished me for it
Through my little son ;
My Father-in-law
To the commune had offered
My little Fedótka
As help to the shepherd
When he was turned eight. . . .
One night I was waiting
To give him his supper ;
The cattle already
Were home, but he came not.
I went through the village
And saw that the people
Were gathered together
And talking of something.
I listened, then elbowed
My way through the people ;
Fedótka was set
In their midst, pale and trembling,

The Elder was gripping
His ear. 'What has happened?
And why do you hold him?'
I said to the Elder.

"'I'm going to beat him,—
He threw a young lamb
To the wolf,' he replied.

"I snatched my Fedótka
Away from their clutches;
And somehow the Elder
Fell down on the ground!

"The story was strange:
It appears that the shepherd
Went home for awhile,
Leaving little Fedótka
In charge of the flock.
'I was sitting,' he told me,
'Alone on the hillside,
When all of a sudden
A wolf ran close by me
And picked Masha's lamb up.
I threw myself at her,
I whistled and shouted,
I cracked with my whip,
Blew my horn for Valétka,
And then I gave chase.
I run fast, little Mother,
But still I could never
Have followed the robber
If not for the traces
She left; because, Mother,
Her breasts hung so low
(She was suckling her children)

They dragged on the earth
And left two tracks of blood.
But further the grey one
Went slower and slower;
And then she looked back
And she saw I was coming.
At last she sat down.
With my whip then I lashed her;
"Come, give me the lamb,
You grey devil!" She crouched,
But would not give it up.
I said—"I must save it
Although she should kill me."
I threw myself on her
And snatched it away,
But she did not attack me.
The lamb was quite dead,
She herself was scarce living.
She gnashed with her teeth
And her breathing was heavy;
And two streams of blood ran
From under her body.
Her ribs could be counted,
Her head was hung down,
But her eyes, little Mother,
Looked straight into mine . . .
Then she groaned of a sudden,
She groaned, and it sounded
As if she were crying.
I threw her the lamb.' . . .

"Well, that was the story.
And foolish Fedótka
Ran back to the village
And told them about it.

And they, in their anger,
Were going to beat him
When I came upon them.
The Elder, because
Of his fall, was indignant,
He shouted—'How dare you!
Do you want a beating
Yourself?' And the woman
Whose lamb had been stolen
Cried, 'Whip the lad soundly,
'Twill teach him a lesson!'
Fedótka she pulled from
My arms, and he trembled,
He shook like a leaf.

"Then the horns of the huntsmen
Were heard,—the Pomyéshchick
Returning from hunting.
I ran to him, crying,
'Oh, save us! Protect us!'

"'What's wrong? Call the Elder!'
And then, in an instant,
The matter is settled:
'The shepherd is tiny—
His youth and his folly
May well be forgiven.
The woman's presumption
You'll punish severely!'

"'Oh, Barin, God bless you!'
I danced with delight!
'Fedótka is safe now!
Run home, quick, Fedótka.'

"'Your will shall be done, sir,'

The Elder said, bowing;
'Now, woman, prepare;
You can dance later on!'

"A gossip then whispered,
'Fall down at the feet
Of the Elder—beg mercy!'

"'Fedótka—go home!'

"Then I kissed him, and told him:
'Remember, Fedótka,
That I shall be angry
If once you look backwards.
Run home!'

"Well, my brothers,
To leave out a word
Of the song is to spoil it,—
I lay on the ground. . . .

* * * * *

"I crawled like a cat
To Fedótushka's corner
That night. He was sleeping,
He tossed in his dream.
One hand was hung down,
While the other, clenched tightly,
Was shielding his eyes:
'You've been crying, my treasure;
Sleep, darling, it's nothing—
See, Mother is near!'
I'd lost little Djóma
While heavy with this one;
He was but a weakling,
But grew very clever.
He works with his dad now,

And built such a chimney
With him, for his master,
The like of it never
Was seen. Well, I sat there
The whole of the night
By the sweet little shepherd.
At daybreak I crossed him,
I fastened his laputs,
I gave him his wallet,
His horn and his whip.
The rest began stirring,
But nothing I told them
Of all that had happened,
But that day I stayed
From the work in the fields.

" I went to the banks
Of the swift little river,
I sought for a spot
Which was silent and lonely
Amid the green rushes
That grow by the bank.

" And on the grey stone
I sat down, sick and weary,
And leaning my head
On my hands, I lamented,
Poor sorrowing orphan.
And loudly I called
On the names of my parents:
' Oh, come, little Father,
My tender protector!
Oh, look at the daughter
You cherished and loved! '

" In vain do I call him!

The loved one has left me;
The guest without lord,
Without race, without kindred,
Named Death, has appeared,
And has called him away.

"And wildly I summon
My mother, my mother!
The boisterous wind cries,
The distant hills answer,
But mother is dead,
She can hear me no longer!

"You grieved day and night,
And you prayed for me always,
But never, beloved,
Shall I see you again;
You cannot turn back now,
And I may not follow.

"A pathway so strange,
So unknown, you have chosen,
The beasts cannot find it,
The winds cannot reach it,
My voice will be lost
In the terrible distance. . . .

"My loving protectors,
If you could but see me!
Could know what your daughter
Must suffer without you!
Could learn of the people
To whom you have left her!

"By night bathed in tears,
And by day weak and trembling,
I bow like the grass

To the wind, but in secret
A heart full of fury
Is gnawing my breast ! "

CHAPTER VI

AN UNLUCKY YEAR

" Strange stars played that year
On the face of the Heavens ;
And some said, ' The Lord rides
Abroad, and His angels
With long flaming brooms sweep
The floor of the Heavens
In front of his carriage.'
But others were frightened,—
They said, ' It is rather
The Antichrist coming !
It signals misfortune ! '
And they read it truly.
A terrible year came,
A terrible famine,
When brother denied
To his brother a morsel.
And then I remembered
The wolf that was hungry,
For I was like her,
Craving food for my children.
Now Mother-in-law found
A new superstition :
She said to the neighbours
That I was the reason
Of all the misfortune ;
And why ? I had caused it

By changing my shirt
On the day before Christmas !
Well, I escaped lightly,
For I had a husband
To shield and protect me,
But one woman, having
Offended, was beaten
To death by the people.
To play with the starving
Is dangerous, my friends.

" The famine was scarcely
At end, when another
Misfortune befell us—
The dreaded recruiting.
But I was not troubled
By that, because Phílip
Was safe : one already
Had served of his people.
One night I sat working,
My husband, his brothers,
The family, all had
Been out since the morning.
My Father-in-law
Had been called to take part
In the communal meeting.
The women were standing
And chatting with neighbours.
But I was exhausted,
For then I was heavy
With child. I was ailing,
And hourly expected
My time. When the children
Were fed and asleep
I lay down on the oven.

The women came home soon
And called for their suppers ;
But Father-in-law
Had not come, so we waited.
He came, tired and gloomy :
' Eh, wife, we are ruined !
I'm weary with running,
But nothing can save us :
They've taken the eldest—
Now give them the youngest !
I've counted the years
To a day—I have proved them ;
They listen to nothing.
They want to take Phílip !
I prayed to the commune—
But what is it worth ?
I ran to the bailiff ;
He swore he was sorry,
But couldn't assist us.
I went to the clerk then ;
You might just as well
Set to work with a hatchet
To chop out the shadows
Up there, on the ceiling,
As try to get truth
Out of that little rascal !
He's bought. They are all bought,—
Not one of them honest !
If only he knew it—
The Governor—he'd teach them !
If he would but order
The commune to show him
The lists of the volost,
And see how they cheat us ! '
The mother and daughters

Are groaning and crying ;
  But I ! . . . I am cold. . . .
I am burning in fever ! . . .
  My thoughts . . . I have no thoughts !
I think I am dreaming !
  My fatherless children
Are standing before me,
  And crying with hunger.
The family, frowning,
  Looks coldly upon them. . . .
At home they are ' noisy,'
  At play they are ' clumsy,'
At table they're ' gluttons ' !
  And somebody threatens
To punish my children—
  They slap them and pinch them !
Be silent, you mother !
  You wife of a soldier !

* * * * *

" I now have no part
In the village allotments,
  No share in the building,
The clothes, and the cattle,
  And these are my riches :
Three lakes of salt tear-drops,
  Three fields sown with grief !

* * * * *

" And now, like a sinner,
  I bow to the neighbours ;
I ask their forgiveness ;
  I hear myself saying,
' Forgive me for being
  So haughty and proud !
I little expected

That God, for my pride,
Would have left me forsaken!
I pray you, good people,
To show me more wisdom,
To teach me to live
And to nourish my children,
What food they should have,
And what drink, and what teaching.'

* * * * *

"I'm sending my children
To beg in the village;
'Go, children, beg humbly,
But dare not to steal.'
The children are sobbing,
'It's cold, little Mother,
Our clothes are in rags;
We are weary of passing
From doorway to doorway;
We stand by the windows
And shiver. We're frightened
To beg of the rich folk;
The poor ones say, "God will
Provide for the orphans!"
We cannot come home,
For if we bring nothing
We know you'll be angry!'

* * * * *

"To go to God's church
I have made myself tidy;
I hear how the neighbours
Are laughing around me:
'Now who is she setting
Her cap at?' they whisper.

* * * * *

"Don't wash yourself clean,
And don't dress yourself nicely;
The neighbours are sharp—
They have eyes like the eagle
And tongues like the serpent.
Walk humbly and slowly,
Don't laugh when you're cheerful,
Don't weep when you're sad.

* * * * *

"The dull, endless winter
Has come, and the fields
And the pretty green meadows
Are hidden away
'Neath the snow. Nothing living
Is seen in the folds
Of the gleaming white grave-clothes.
No friend under Heaven
There is for the woman,
The wife of the soldier.
Who knows what her thoughts are?
Who cares for her words?
Who is sad for her sorrow?
And where can she bury
The insults they cast her?
Perhaps in the woods?—
But the woods are all withered!
Perhaps in the meadows?—
The meadows are frozen!
The swift little stream?—
But its waters are sleeping!
No,—carry them with you
To hide in your grave!

* * * * *

"My husband is gone;

There is no one to shield me.
Hark, hark! There's the drum!
And the soldiers are coming!
They halt;—they are forming
A line in the market.
'Attention!' There's Phílip!
There's Phílip! I see him!
'Attention! Eyes front!'
It's Shaláshnikov shouting. . . .
Oh, Phílip has fallen!
Have mercy! Have mercy!
'Try that—try some physic!
You'll soon get to like it!
Ha, ha! Ha, ha, ha!'
He is striking my husband!
'I flog, not with whips,
But with knouts made for giants!'

* * * * *

"I sprang from the stove,
Though my burden was heavy;
I listen. . . . All silent. . . .
The family sleeping.
I creep to the doorway
And open it softly,
I pass down the street
Through the night. . . . It is frosty.
In Domina's hut,
Where the youths and young maidens
Assemble at night,
They are singing in chorus
My favourite song:

"'The fir tree on the mountain stands,
The little cottage at its foot,
And Máshenka is there.

Her father comes to look for her,
He wakens her and coaxes her :
" Eh, Máshenka, come home," he cries,
" Efeémovna, come home ! "

" ' " I won't come, and I won't listen !
Black the night—no moon in Heaven !
Swift the stream—no bridge, no ferry !
Dark the wood—no guards." 231

" ' The fir tree on the mountain stands,
The little cottage at its foot,
And Máshenka is there.
Her mother comes to look for her,
She wakens her and coaxes her :
" Now, Máshenka, come home," she says,
" Efeémovna, come home ! "

" ' " I won't come, and I won't listen !
Black the night—no moon in Heaven !
Swift the stream—no bridge, no ferry !
Dark the wood—no guards ! " 242

" ' The fir tree on the mountain stands,
The little cottage at its foot,
And Máshenka is there.
Young Peter comes to look for her,
He wakens her, and coaxes her :
" Oh, Máshenka, come home with me !
My little dove, Efeémovna,
Come home, my dear, with me." 250

" ' " I will come, and I will listen,
Fair the night—the moon in Heaven,
Calm the stream with bridge and ferry,
In the wood strong guards." ' "

CHAPTER VII

THE GOVERNOR'S LADY

" I'm hurrying blindly,
I've run through the village ;
  Yet strangely the singing
From Domina's cottage
  Pursues me and rings
In my ears. My pace slackens,
  I rest for awhile,
And look back at the village :
  I see the white snowdrift
O'er valley and meadow,
  The moon in the Heavens,
My self, and my shadow. . . .

" I do not feel frightened ;
A flutter of gladness
  Awakes in my bosom,
' You brisk winter breezes,
  My thanks for your freshness !
I crave for your breath
  As the sick man for water.'
My mind has grown clear,
  To my knees I am falling :
' O Mother of Christ !
  I beseech Thee to tell me
Why God is so angry
  With me. Holy Mother !
No tiniest bone
  In my limbs is unbroken ;
No nerve in my body
  Uncrushed. I am patient,—

I have not complained.
All the strength that God gave me
I've spent on my work;
All the love on my children.
But Thou seest all things,
And Thou art so mighty;
Oh, succour thy slave!'

"I love now to pray
On a night clear and frosty;
To kneel on the earth
'Neath the stars in the winter.
Remember, my brothers,
If trouble befall you,
To counsel your women
To pray in that manner;
In no other place
Can one pray so devoutly,
At no other season. . . .

"I prayed and grew stronger;
I bowed my hot head
To the cool snowy napkin,
And quickly my fever
Was spent. And when later
I looked at the roadway
I found that I knew it;
I'd passed it before
On the mild summer evenings;
At morning I'd greeted
The sunrise upon it
In haste to be off
To the fair. And I walked now
The whole of the night
Without meeting a soul. . . .

But now to the cities
The sledges are starting,
Piled high with the hay
Of the peasants. I watch them,
And pity the horses :
Their lawful provision
Themselves they are dragging
Away from the courtyard ;
And afterwards they
Will be hungry. I pondered :
The horses that work
Must eat straw, while the idlers
Are fed upon oats.
But when Need comes he hastens
To empty your corn-lofts,
Won't wait to be asked. . . .

" I come within sight
Of the town. On the outskirts
The merchants are cheating
And wheedling the peasants,
There's shouting and swearing,
Abusing and coaxing.

" I enter the town
As the bell rings for matins.
I make for the market
Before the cathedral.
I know that the gates
Of the Governor's courtyard
Are there. It is dark still,
The square is quite empty ;
In front of the courtyard
A sentinel paces :
' Pray tell me, good man,
Does the Governor rise early ? '

" ' Don't know. Go away.
I'm forbidden to chatter.'
(I give him some farthings.)
' Well, go to the porter ;
He knows all about it.'

" ' Where is he ? And what
Is his name, little sentry ? '

" ' Makhár Fedosséich,
He stands at the entrance.'
I walk to the entrance,
The doors are not opened.
I sit on the doorsteps
And think. . . .

" It grows lighter,
A man with a ladder
Is turning the lamps down.

" ' Heh, what are you doing ?
And how did you enter ? '

" I start in confusion,
I see in the doorway
A bald-headed man
In a bed-gown. Then quickly
I come to my senses,
And bowing before him
(Makhár Fedosséich),
I give him a rouble.

" ' I come in great need
To the Governor, and see him
I must, little Uncle ! '

" ' You can't see him, woman.
Well, well. . . . I'll consider. . . .
Return in two hours.'

" I see in the market
A pedestal standing,
A peasant upon it,
He's just like Savyéli,
And all made of brass :
It's Susánin's memorial.
While crossing the market
I'm suddenly startled—
A heavy grey drake
From a cook is escaping ;
The fellow pursues
With a knife. It is shrieking.
My God, what a sound !
To the soul it has pierced me.
('Tis only the knife
That can wring such a shriek.)
The cook has now caught it ;
It stretches its neck,
Begins angrily hissing,
As if it would frighten
The cook,—the poor creature !
I run from the market,
I'm trembling and thinking,
' The drake will grow calm
'Neath the kiss of the knife ! '

" The Governor's dwelling
Again is before me,
With balconies, turrets,
And steps which are covered
With beautiful carpets.

I gaze at the windows
  All shaded with curtains.
'Now, which is your chamber,'
  I think, 'my desired one?
Say, do you sleep sweetly?
  Of what are you dreaming?'
I creep up the doorsteps,
  And keep to the side
Not to tread on the carpets;
  And there, near the entrance,
I wait for the porter.

"'You're early, my gossip!'
Again I am startled:
  A stranger I see,—
For at first I don't know him;
  A livery richly
Embroidered he wears now;
  He holds a fine staff;
He's not bald any longer!
  He laughs—'You were frightened?'

"'I'm tired, little Uncle.'

"'You've plenty of courage,
  God's mercy be yours!
Come, give me another,
  And I will befriend you.'

"(I give him a rouble.)
'Now come, I will make you
  Some tea in my office.'

"His den is just under
  The stairs. There's a bedstead,

A little iron stove,
And a candlestick in it,
A big samovar,
And a lamp in the corner.
Some pictures are hung
On the wall. 'That's His Highness,'
The porter remarks,
And he points with his finger.
I look at the picture:
A warrior covered
With stars. 'Is he gentle?'

"'That's just as you happen
To find him. Why, neighbour,
The same is with me:
To-day I'm obliging,
At times I'm as cross
As a dog.'

"'You are dull here,
Perhaps, little Uncle?'

"'Oh no, I'm not dull;
I've a task that's exciting:
Ten years have I fought
With a foe: Sleep his name is.
And I can assure you
That when I have taken
An odd cup of vodka,
The stove is red hot,
And the smuts from the candle
Have blackened the air,
It's a desperate struggle!'

"There's somebody knocking.
Makhár has gone out;

I am sitting alone now.
I go to the door
And look out. In the courtyard
A carriage is waiting.
I ask, ' Is he coming ? '
' The lady is coming,'
The porter makes answer,
And hurries away
To the foot of the staircase.
A lady descends,
Wrapped in costliest sables,
A lackey behind her.
I know not what followed
(The Mother of God
Must have come to my aid),
It seems that I fell
At the feet of the lady,
And cried, ' Oh, protect us !
They try to deceive us !
My husband—the only
Support of my children—
They've taken away—
Oh, they've acted unjustly ! . . .

" ' Who are you, my pigeon ? '

" My answer I know not,
Or whether I gave one ;
A sudden sharp pang tore
My body in twain.
* * * * *
" I opened my eyes
In a beautiful chamber,
In bed I was laid
'Neath a canopy, brothers,

And near me was sitting
A nurse, in a head-dress
All streaming with ribbons.
She's nursing a baby.
'Who's is it?' I ask her.

"'It's yours, little Mother.'
I kiss my sweet child.
It seems, when I fell
At the feet of the lady,
I wept so and raved so,
Already so weakened
By grief and exhaustion,
That there, without warning,
My labour had seized me.
I bless the sweet lady,
Elyén Alexándrovna,
Only a mother
Could bless her as I do.
She christened my baby,
Lidórushka called him."

"And what of your husband?"

"They sent to the village
And started enquiries,
And soon he was righted.
Elyén Alexándrovna
Brought him herself
To my side. She was tender
And clever and lovely,
And healthy, but childless,
For God would not grant her
A child. While I stayed there
My baby was never
Away from her bosom.

She tended and nursed him
Herself, like a mother.
The spring had set in
And the birch trees were budding,
Before she would let us
Set out to go home.

"Oh, how fair and bright
In God's world to-day!
Glad my heart and gay!

"Homewards lies our way,
Near the wood we pause,
See, the meadows green,
Hark! the waters play.
Rivulet so pure,
Little child of Spring,
How you leap and sing,
Rippling in the leaves!
High the little lark
Soars above our heads,
Carols blissfully!
Let us stand and gaze;
Soon our eyes will meet,
I will laugh to thee,
Thou wilt smile at me,
Wee Lidórushka!

"Look, a beggar comes,
Trembling, weak, old man,
Give him what we can.
'Do not pray for us,'
Let us to him say,
'Father, you must pray
For Elyénushka,

For the lady fair,
Alexándrovna ! '

" Look, the church of God !
Sign the cross we twain
Time and time again. . . .
' Grant, O blessed Lord,
Thy most fair reward
To the gentle heart
Of Elyénushka,
Alexándrovna ! '

" Green the forest grows,
Green the pretty fields,
In each dip and dell
Bright a mirror gleams.
Oh, how fair it is
In God's world to-day,
Glad my heart and gay !
Like the snowy swan
O'er the lake I sail,
O'er the waving steppes
Speeding like the quail.

" Here we are at home.
Through the door I fly
Like the pigeon grey ;
Low the family
Bow at sight of me,
Nearly to the ground,
Pardon they beseech
For the way in which
They have treated me.
' Sit you down,' I say,
' Do not bow to me.

Listen to my words :
You must bow to one
Better far than I,
Stronger far than I,
Sing your praise to her.'

" ' Sing to whom,' you say ?
' To Elyénushka,
To the fairest soul
God has sent on earth :
Alexándrovna ! ' "

CHAPTER VIII

THE WOMAN'S LEGEND

Matróna is silent.
You see that the peasants
Have seized the occasion—
They are not forgetting
To drink to the health
Of the beautiful lady !
But noticing soon
That Matróna is silent,
In file they approach her.

" What more will you tell us ? "

" What more ? " says Matróna,
" My fame as the ' lucky one '
Spread through the volost,
Since then they have called me
' The Governor's Lady.'

You ask me, what further ?
I managed the household,
And brought up my children.
You ask, was I happy ?
Well, that you can answer
Yourselves. And my children ?
Five sons ! But the peasant's
Misfortunes are endless :
They've robbed me of one."
She lowers her voice,
And her lashes are trembling,
But turning her head
She endeavours to hide it.
The peasants are rather
Confused, but they linger :
" Well, neighbour," they say,
" Will you tell us no more ? "

" There's one thing : You're foolish
To seek among women
For happiness, brothers."

" That's all ? "

" I can tell you
That twice we were swallowed
By fire, and that three times
The plague fell upon us ;
But such things are common
To all of us peasants.
Like cattle we toiled,
My steps were as easy
As those of a horse
In the plough. But my troubles
Were not very startling :

No mountains have moved
From their places to crush me;
And God did not strike me
With arrows of thunder.
The storm in my soul
Has been silent, unnoticed,
So how can I paint it
To you? O'er the Mother
Insulted and outraged,
The blood of her first-born
As o'er a crushed worm
Has been poured; and unanswered
The deadly offences
That many have dealt her;
The knout has been raised
Unopposed o'er her body.
But one thing I never
Have suffered: I told you
That Sítnikov died,
That the last, irreparable
Shame had been spared me.
You ask me for happiness?
Brothers, you mock me!
Go, ask the official,
The Minister mighty,
The Tsar—Little Father,
But never a woman!
God knows—among women
Your search will be endless,
Will lead to your graves.

"A pious old woman
Once asked us for shelter;
The whole of her lifetime
The Flesh she had conquered

By penance and fasting ;
She'd bathed in the Jordan,
And prayed at the tomb
Of Christ Jesus. She told us
The keys to the welfare
And freedom of women
Have long been mislaid—
God Himself has mislaid them.
And hermits, chaste women,
And monks of great learning,
Have sought them all over
The world, but not found them.
They're lost, and 'tis thought
By a fish they've been swallowed.
God's knights have been seeking
In towns and in deserts,
Weak, starving, and cold,
Hung with torturing fetters.
They've asked of the seers,
The stars they have counted
To learn ;—but no keys !
Through the world they have journeyed ;
In underground caverns,
In mountains, they've sought them.
At last they discovered
Some keys. They were precious,
But only—not ours.
Yet the warriors triumphed :
They fitted the lock
On the fetters of serfdom !
A sigh from all over
The world rose to Heaven,
A breath of relief,
Oh, so deep and so joyful !
Our keys were still missing. . . .

Great champions, though,
Till to-day are still searching,
Deep down in the bed
Of the ocean they wander,
They fly to the skies,
In the clouds they are seeking,
But never the keys.
Do you think they will find them ?
Who knows ? Who can say ?
But I think it is doubtful,
For which fish has swallowed
Those treasures so priceless,
In which sea it swims—
God Himself has forgotten ! ”

PART IV.

Dedicated to Serge Petrovitch Botkin

A FEAST FOR THE WHOLE VILLAGE

Prologue

A very old willow
  There is at the end
Of the village of "Earthworms,"
  Where most of the folk
Have been diggers and delvers
From times very ancient
  (Though some produced tar).
This willow had witnessed
  The lives of the peasants:
Their holidays, dances,
  Their communal meetings,
Their floggings by day,
  In the evening their wooing,
And now it looked down
  On a wonderful feast.

  The feast was conducted
In Petersburg fashion,
  For Klímka, the peasant

(Our former acquaintance),
  Had seen on his travels
Some noblemen's banquets,
  With toasts and orations,
And he had arranged it.

The peasants were sitting
  On tree-trunks cut newly
For building a hut.
  With them, too, our seven
(Who always were ready
  To see what was passing)
Were sitting and chatting
  With Vlass, the old Elder.
As soon as they fancied
  A drink would be welcome,
The Elder called out
  To his son, "Run for Trifon!"
With Trifon the deacon,
  A jovial fellow,
A chum of the Elder's,
  His sons come as well.

Two pupils they are
  Of the clerical college
Named Sava and Grisha.
  The former, the eldest,
Is nineteen years old.
He looks like a churchman
  Already, while Grisha
Has fine, curly hair,
  With a slight tinge of red,
And a thin, sallow face.
Both capital fellows
  They are, kind and simple,

They work with the ploughshare,
The scythe, and the sickle,
Drink vodka on feast-days,
And mix with the peasants
Entirely as equals. . . .

The village lies close
To the banks of the Volga ;
A small town there is
On the opposite side.
(To speak more correctly,
There's now not a trace
Of the town, save some ashes :
A fire has demolished it
Two days ago.)

Some people are waiting
To cross by the ferry,
While some feed their horses
(All friends of the peasants).
Some beggars have crawled
To the spot ; there are pilgrims,
Both women and men ;
The women loquacious,
The men very silent.

The old Prince Yutiátin
Is dead, but the peasants
Are not yet aware
That instead of the hayfields
His heirs have bequeathed them
A long litigation.
So, drinking their vodka,
They first of all argue
Of how they'll dispose
Of the beautiful hayfields.

You were not all cozened,[1]
  You people of Russia,
And robbed of your land.
In some blessed spots
  You were favoured by fortune!
By some lucky chance—
  The Pomyéshchick's long absence,
Some slip of posrédnik's,
By wiles of the commune,
  You managed to capture
A slice of the forest.
How proud are the peasants
  In such happy corners!
The Elder may tap
  At the window for taxes,
The peasant will bluster,—
  One answer has he:
"Just sell off the forest,
  And don't bother me!"

So now, too, the peasants
  Of "Earthworms" decided
To part with the fields
  To the Elder for taxes.
They calculate closely:
  "They'll pay both the taxes
And dues—with some over,
  Heh, Vlásuchka, won't they?"

"Once taxes are paid
  I'll uncover to no man.
I'll work if it please me,

[1] A reference to the arranging of terms between the Pomyéshchicks and peasants with regard to land at the time of the emancipation of the serfs.

I'll lie with my wife,
Or I'll go to the tavern."
" Bravo ! " cry the peasants,
In answer to Klímka,
" Now, Vlásuchka, do you
Agree to our plan ? "

" The speeches of Klímka
Are short, and as plain
As the public-house signboard,"
Says Vlásuchka, joking.
" And that is his manner :
To start with a woman
And end in the tavern."

" Well, where should one end, then ?
Perhaps in the prison ?
Now—as to the taxes,
Don't croak, but decide."

But Vlásuchka really
Was far from a croaker.
The kindest soul living
Was he, and he sorrowed
For all in the village,
Not only for one.
His conscience had pricked him
While serving his haughty
And rigorous Barin,
Obeying his orders,
So cruel and oppressive.
While young he had always
Believed in ' improvements,'
But soon he observed
That they ended in nothing,

Or worse—in misfortune.
So now he mistrusted
The new, rich in promise.
The wheels that have passed
O'er the roadways of Moscow
Are fewer by far
Than the injuries done
To the soul of the peasant.
There's nothing to laugh at
In that, so the Elder
Perforce had grown gloomy.
But now, the gay pranks
Of the peasants of "Earthworms"
Affected him too.
His thoughts became brighter:
No taxes . . . no barschin . . .
No stick held above you,
Dear God, am I dreaming?
Old Vlásuchka smiles. . . .
A miracle surely!
Like that, when the sun
From the splendour of Heaven
May cast a chance ray
In the depths of the forest:
The dew shines like diamonds,
The mosses are gilded.

"Drink, drink, little peasants!
Disport yourselves bravely!"
'Twas gay beyond measure.
In each breast awakens
A wondrous new feeling,
As though from the depths
Of a bottomless gulf
On the crest of a wave,

They've been borne to the surface
To find there awaits them
A feast without end.

Another pail's started,
And, oh, what a clamour
Of voices arises,
And singing begins.

And just as a dead man's
Relations and friends
Talk of nothing but him
Till the funeral's over,
Until they have finished
The funeral banquet
And started to yawn,—
So over the vodka,
Beneath the old willow,
One topic prevails :
The " break in the chain "
Of their lords, the Pomyéshchicks.

The deacon they ask,
And his sons, to oblige them
By singing a song
Called the " Merry Song " to them.

(This song was not really
A song of the people :
The deacon's son Grisha
Had sung it them first.
But since the great day
When the Tsar, Little Father,
Had broken the chains
Of his suffering children,

They always had danced
To this tune on the feast-days.
The " popes " and the house-serfs
Could sing the words also,
The peasants could not,
But whenever they heard it
They whistled and stamped,
And the " Merry Song " called it.)

CHAPTER I

BITTER TIMES—BITTER SONGS

The Merry Song

* * * * *

The " Merry Song " finished,
They struck up a chorus,
A song of their own,
A wailing lament
(For, as yet, they've no others).
And is it not strange
That in vast Holy Russia,
With masses and masses
Of people unnumbered,
No song has been born
Overflowing with joy
Like a bright summer morning ?
Yes, is it not striking,
And is it not tragic ?
O times that are coming,
You, too, will be painted
In songs of the people,

But how? In what colours?
And will there be ever
A smile in their hearts?

"Eh, that's a fine song!
'Tis a shame to forget it."
Our peasants regret
That their memories trick them.
And, meanwhile, the peasants
Of "Earthworms" are saying,
"We lived but for 'barschin,'
Pray, how would you like it?
You see, we grew up
'Neath the snout of the Barin,
Our noses were glued
To the earth. We'd forgotten
The faces of neighbours,
Forgot how to speak.
We got tipsy in silence,
Gave kisses in silence,
Fought silently, too."

"Eh, who speaks of silence?
We'd more cause to hate it
Than you," said a peasant
Who came from a Volost
Near by, with a waggon
Of hay for the market.
(Some heavy misfortune
Had forced him to sell it.)
"For once our young lady,
Miss Gertrude, decided
That any one swearing
Must soundly be flogged.
Dear Lord, how they flogged us
Until we stopped swearing!

Of course, not to swear
For the peasant means—silence.
We suffered, God knows!
Then freedom was granted,
We feasted it finely,
And then we made up
For our silence, believe me:
We swore in such style
That Pope John was ashamed
For the church-bells to hear us.
(They rang all day long.)
What stories we told then!
We'd no need to seek
For the words. They were written
All over our backs."

"A funny thing happened
In our parts,—a strange thing,"
Remarked a tall fellow
With bushy black whiskers.
(He wore a round hat
With a badge, a red waistcoat
With ten shining buttons,
And stout homespun breeches.
His legs, to contrast
With the smartness above them,
Were tied up in rags!
There are trees very like him,
From which a small shepherd
Has stripped all the bark off
Below, while above
Not a scratch can be noticed!
And surely no raven
Would scorn such a summit
For building a nest.)

" Well, tell us about it."

" I'll first have a smoke."

And while he is smoking
Our peasants are asking,
" And who is this fellow ?
What sort of a goose ? "

" An unfortunate footman
Inscribed in our Volost,
A martyr, a house-serf
Of Count Sinegúsin's.
His name is Vikénti.
He sprang from the foot-board
Direct to the ploughshare ;
We still call him ' Footman.'
He's healthy enough,
But his legs are not strong,
And they're given to trembling.
His lady would drive
In a carriage and four
To go hunting for mushrooms.
He'll tell you some stories :
His memory's splendid ;
You'd think he had eaten
The eggs of a magpie." [1]

Now, setting his hat straight,
Vikénti commences
To tell them the story.

[1] There is a Russian superstition that a good memory is gained by eating magpies' eggs.

The Dutiful Serf—Jacob the Faithful

Once an official, of rather low family,
Bought a small village from bribes he had stored,
Lived in it thirty-three years without leaving it,
Feasted and hunted and drank like a lord.
Greedy and miserly, not many friends he made,
Sometimes he'd drive to his sister's to tea.
Cruel was his nature, and not to his serfs alone :
On his own daughter no pity had he,
Horsewhipped her husband, and drove them both penniless
Out of his house ; not a soul dare resist.
Jacob, his dutiful servant,
Ever of orders observant,
Often he'd strike in the mouth with his fist.

Hearts of men born into slavery
Sometimes with dogs' hearts accord :
Crueller the punishments dealt to them
More they will worship their lord.

Jacob, it seems, had a heart of that quality,
Only two sources of joy he possessed :
Tending and serving his Barin devotedly,
Rocking his own little nephew to rest.
So they lived on till old age was approaching them,
Weak grew the legs of the Barin at last,
Vainly, to cure them, he tried every remedy ;
Feast and debauch were delights of the past.

Plump are his hands and white,
Keen are his eyes and bright,
Rosy his cheek remains,
But on his legs—are chains!

Helpless the Barin now lies in his dressing-gown,
Bitterly, bitterly cursing his fate.
Jacob, his "brother and friend,"—so the Barin says,—
Nurses him, humours him early and late.
Winter and summer they pass thus in company,
Mostly at card-games together they play,
Sometimes they drive for a change to the sister's house,
Eight miles or so, on a very fine day.
Jacob himself bears his lord to the carriage then,
Drives him with care at a moderate pace,
Carries him into the old lady's drawing-room. . . .
So they live peacefully on for a space.

Grisha, the nephew of Jacob, a youth becomes,
Falls at the feet of his lord: "I would wed."
"Who will the bride be?" "Her name is Arisha, sir."
Thunders the Barin, "You'd better be dead!"
Looking at her he had often bethought himself,
"Oh, for my legs! Would the Lord but relent!"
So, though the uncle entreated his clemency,
Grisha to serve in the army he sent.

Cut to the heart was the slave by this tyranny,
Jacob the Faithful went mad for a spell :
Drank like a fish, and his lord was disconsolate,
No one could please him : " You fools, go to Hell ! "
Hate in each bosom since long has been festering :
Now for revenge ! Now the Barin must pay,
Roughly they deal with his whims and infirmities,
Two quite unbearable weeks pass away.
Then the most faithful of servants appeared again,
Straight at the feet of his master he fell,
Pity has softened his heart to the legless one,
Who can look after the Barin so well ?
" Barin, recall not your pitiless cruelty,
While I am living my cross I'll embrace."
Peacefully now lies the lord in his dressing-gown,
Jacob, once more, is restored to his place.
Brother again the Pomyéshchick has christened him.
" Why do you wince, little Jacob ? " says he.
" Barin, there's something that stings . . . in my memory. . . ."
Now they thread mushrooms, play cards, and drink tea,
Then they make brandy from cherries and raspberries,
Next for a drive to the sister's they start,
See how the Barin lies smoking contentedly,
Green leaves and sunshine have gladdened his heart.
Jacob is gloomy, converses unwillingly,

Trembling his fingers, the reins are hung slack,
" Spirits unholy ! " he murmurs unceasingly,
" Leave me ! Begone ! " (But again they attack.)
Just on the right lies a deep, wooded precipice,
Known in those parts as " The Devil's Abyss,"
Jacob turns into the wood by the side of it.
Queries his lord, " What's the meaning of this ? "
Jacob replies not. The path here is difficult,
Branches and ruts make their steps very slow;
Rustling of trees is heard. Spring waters noisily
Cast themselves into the hollow below.
Then there's a halt,—not a step can the horses move :
Straight in their path stand the pines like a wall ;
Jacob gets down, and, the horses unharnessing,
Takes of the Barin no notice at all.

Vainly the Barin's exclaiming and questioning,
Jacob is pale, and he shakes like a leaf,
Evilly smiles at entreaties and promises :
" Am I a murderer, then, or a thief ?
No, Barin, *you* shall not die. There's another way ! "
Now he has climbed to the top of a pine,
Fastened the reins to the summit, and crossed himself,
Turning his face to the sun's bright decline.
Thrusting his head in the noose . . . he has hanged himself !

Horrible ! Horrible ! See, how he sways
Backwards and forwards. . . . The Barin, unfortunate,
Shouts for assistance, and struggles and prays.
Twisting his head he is jerking convulsively,
Straining his voice to the utmost he cries,
All is in vain, there is no one to rescue him,
Only the mischievous echo replies.

Gloomy the hollow now lies in its winding-sheet,
Black is the night. Hear the owls on the wing,
Striking the earth as they pass, while the horses stand
Chewing the leaves, and their bells faintly ring.
Two eyes are burning like lamps at the train's approach,
Steadily, brightly they gleam in the night,
Strange birds are flitting with movements mysterious,
Somewhere at hand they are heard to alight.
Straight over Jacob a raven exultingly
Hovers and caws. Now a hundred fly round !
Feebly the Barin is waving his crutch at them,
Merciful Heaven, what horrors abound !

So the poor Barin all night in the carriage lies,
Shouting, from wolves to protect his old bones.
Early next morning a hunter discovers him,
Carries him home, full of penitent groans :

" Oh, I'm a sinner most infamous ! Punish me ! "
Barin, I think, till you rest in your grave,
One figure surely will haunt you incessantly,
Jacob the Faithful, your dutiful slave.

" What sinners ! What sinners ! "
The peasants are saying,
" I'm sorry for Jacob,
Yet pity the Barin,
Indeed he was punished !
Ah, me ! " Then they listen
To two or three more tales
As strange and as fearful,
And hotly they argue
On who must be reckoned
The greatest of sinners :
" The publican," one says,
And one, " The Pomyéshchick,"
Another, " The peasant."
This last was a carter,
A man of good standing
And sound reputation,
No ignorant babbler.
He'd seen many things
In his life, his own province
Had traversed entirely.
He should have been heard.
The peasants, however,
Were all so indignant
They would not allow him
To speak. As for Klímka,
His wrath is unbounded,
" You fool ! " he is shouting.

" But let me explain."

" I see you are *all* fools,"
A voice remarks roughly :
The voice of a trader
Who squeezes the peasants
For laputs or berries
Or any spare trifles.
But chiefly he's noted
For seizing occasions
When taxes are gathered,
And peasants' possessions
Are bartered at auction.
" You start a discussion
And miss the chief point.
Why, who's the worst sinner ?
Consider a moment."

" Well, who then ? You tell us."

" The robber, of course."

" You've not been a serf, man,"
Says Klímka in answer ;
" The burden was heavy,
But not on your shoulders.
Your pockets are full,
So the robber alarms you ;
The robber with this case
Has nothing to do."

" The case of the robber
Defending the robber,"
The other retorts.

" Now, pray ! " bellows Klímka,
And leaping upon him,
He punches his jaw.

The trader repays him
With buffets as hearty,
" Take leave of your carcase ! "
He roars.

" Here's a tussle ! "
The peasants are clearing
A space for the battle ;
They do not prevent it
Nor do they applaud it.
The blows fall like hail.

" I'll kill you, I'll kill you !
Write home to your parents ! "

" I'll kill you, I'll kill you !
Heh, send for the pope ! "

The trader, bent double
By Klímka, who, clutching
His hair, drags his head down,
Repeating, " He's bowing ! "
Cries, " Stop, that's enough ! "
When Klímka has freed him
He sits on a log,
And says, wiping his face
With a broadly-checked muffler,
" No wonder he conquered :
He ploughs not, he reaps not,
Does nothing but doctor
The pigs and the horses ;
Of course he gets strong ! "

The peasants are laughing,
And Klímka says, mocking,
" Here, try a bit more ! "

" Come on, then ! I'm ready,"
The trader says stoutly,
And rolling his sleeves up,
He spits on his palms.

" The hour has now sounded
For me, though a sinner,
To speak and unite you,"
Ióna pronounces.
The whole of the evening
That diffident pilgrim
Has sat without speaking,
And crossed himself, sighing.
The trader's delighted,
And Klímka replies not.
The rest, without speaking,
Sit down on the ground.

CHAPTER II

PILGRIMS AND WANDERERS

We know that in Russia
Are numbers of people
Who wander at large
Without kindred or home.
They sow not, they reap not,
They feed at the fountain
That's common to all,
That nourishes likewise
The tiniest mouse
And the mightiest army:
The sweat of the peasant.

The peasants will tell you
That whole populations
Of villages sometimes
Turn out in the autumn
To wander like pilgrims.
They beg, and esteem it
A paying profession.
The people consider
That misery drives them
More often than cunning,
And so to the pilgrims
Contribute their mite.
Of course, there are cases
Of downright deception:
One pilgrim's a thief,
Or another may wheedle
Some cloth from the wife
Of a peasant, exchanging
Some "sanctified wafers"
Or "tears of the Virgin"
He's brought from Mount Athos,
And then she'll discover
He's been but as far
As a cloister near Moscow.
One saintly old greybeard
Enraptured the people
By wonderful singing,
And offered to teach
The young girls of the village
The songs of the church
With their mothers' permission.
And all through the winter
He locked himself up
With the girls in a stable.
From thence, sometimes singing

Was heard, but more often
Came laughter and giggles.
Well, what was the upshot ?
He taught them no singing,
But ruined them all.

Some Masters so skilful
There are, they will even
Lay siege to the ladies.
They first to the kitchens
Make sure of admission,
And then through the maids
Gained access to the mistress.
See, there he goes, strutting
Along through the courtyard
And jingling the keys
Of the house like a Barin.
And soon he will spit
In the teeth of the peasants ;
The pious old women,
Who always before
At the house have been welcome,
He'll speedily banish.
The people, however,
Can see in these pilgrims
A good side as well.
For, who begs the money
For building the churches ?
And who keeps the convent's
Collecting-box full ?
And many, though useless,
Are perfectly harmless ;
But some are uncanny,
One can't understand them :
The people know Fóma,

With chains round his middle
Some six stones in weight;
How summer and winter
He walks about barefoot,
And constantly mutters
Of Heaven knows what.
His life, though, is godly:
A stone for his pillow,
A crust for his dinner.

The people know also
The old man, Nikífor,
Adherent, most strange,
Of the sect called "The Hiders."
One day he appeared
In Usólovo village
Upbraiding the people
For lack of religion,
And calling them forth
To the great virgin forest
To seek for salvation.
The chief of police
Of the district just happened
To be in the village
And heard his oration:
"Ho! Question the madman!"

"Thou foe of Christ Jesus!
Thou Antichrist's herald!"
Nikífor retorts.
The Elders are nudging him:
"Now, then, be silent!"
He pays no attention.
They drag him to prison.
He stands in the waggon,

Undauntedly chiding
The chief of police,
And loudly he cries
To the people who follow him :

" Woe to you ! Woe to you ! Bondsmen, I mourn for you !
Though you're in rags, e'en the rags shall be torn from you !
Fiercely with knouts in the past did they mangle you :
Clutches of iron in the future will strangle you ! "

The people are crossing
Themselves. The Nachálnik [1]
Is striking the prophet :
" Remember the Judge
Of Jerusalem, sinner ! "
The driver's so frightened
The reins have escaped him,
His hair stands on end. . . .

And when will the people
Forget Yevressína,
Miraculous widow ?
Let cholera only
Break out in a village :
At once like an envoy
Of God she appears.
She nurses and fosters
And buries the peasants.
The women adore her,
They pray to her almost.

[1] Chief of Police.

It's evident, then,
That the door of the peasant
Is easily opened :
Just knock, and be certain
He'll gladly admit you.
He's never suspicious
Like wealthier people ;
The thought does not strike him
At sight of the humble
And destitute stranger,
" Perhaps he's a thief ! "
And as to the women,
They're simply delighted,
They'll welcome you warmly.

At night, in the Winter,
The family gathered
To work in the cottage
By light of " luchina," [1]
Are charmed by the pilgrim's
Remarkable stories.
He's washed in the steam-bath,
And dipped with his spoon
In the family platter,
First blessing its contents.
His veins have been thawed
By a streamlet of vodka,
His words flow like water.
The hut is as silent
As death. The old father
Was mending the laputs,
But now he has dropped them.

[1] A wooden splinter prepared and used for lighting purposes.

The song of the shuttle
  Is hushed, and the woman
Who sits at the wheel
Is engrossed in the story.
  The daughter, Yevgénka,
Her plump little finger
  Has pricked with a needle.
The blood has dried up,
  But she notices nothing ;
Her sewing has fallen,
  Her eyes are distended,
Her arms hanging limp.
  The children, in bed
On the sleeping-planks, listen,
  Their heads hanging down.
They lie on their stomachs
  Like snug little seals
Upon Archangel ice-blocks.
  Their hair, like a curtain,
Is hiding their faces :
  It's yellow, of course !

But wait. Soon the pilgrim
  Will finish his story—
(It's true)—from Mount Athos.
  It tells how that sinner
The Turk had once driven
  Some monks in rebellion
Right into the sea,—
  Who meekly submitted,
And perished in hundreds.

(What murmurs of horror
  Arise ! Do you notice
The eyes, full of tears ?)

And now comes the climax,
The terrible moment,
And even the mother
Has loosened her hold
On the corpulent bobbin,
It rolls to the ground. . . .
And see how cat Vaska
At once becomes active
And pounces upon it.
At times less enthralling
The antics of Vaska
Would meet their deserts ;
But now he is patting
And touching the bobbin
And leaping around it
With flexible movements,
And no one has noticed.
It rolls to a distance,
The thread is unwound.

Whoever has witnessed
The peasant's delight
At the tales of the pilgrims
Will realise this :
Though never so crushing
His labours and worries,
Though never so pressing
The call of the tavern,
Their weight will not deaden
The soul of the peasant
And will not benumb it.
The road that's before him
Is broad and unending. . . .
When old fields, exhausted,
Play false to the reaper,

He'll seek near the forest
For soil more productive.
The work may be hard,
But the new plot repays him :
It yields a rich harvest
Without being manured.
A soil just as fertile
Lies hid in the soul
Of the people of Russia :
O Sower, then come !

The pilgrim Ióna
Since long is well known
In the village of " Earthworms."
The peasants contend
For the honour of giving
The holy man shelter.
At last, to appease them,
He'd say to the women,
" Come, bring out your icons ! "
They'd hurry to fetch them.
Ióna, prostrating
Himself to each icon,
Would say to the people,
" Dispute not ! Be patient,
And God will decide :
The saint who looks kindest
At me I will follow."
And often he'd follow
The icon most poor
To the lowliest hovel.
That hut would become then
A Cup overflowing ;
The women would run there

With baskets and saucepans,
All thanks to Ióna.

And now, without hurry
Or noise, he's beginning
To tell them a story,
"Two Infamous Sinners,"
But first, most devoutly,
He crosses himself.

Two Infamous Sinners

Come, let us praise the Omnipotent!
Let us the legend relate
Told by a monk in the Priory.
Thus did I hear him narrate:

Once were twelve brigands notorious,
One, Kudeár, at their head;
Torrents of blood of good Christians
Foully the miscreants shed.

Deep in the forest their hiding-place,
Rich was their booty and rare;
Once Kudeár from near Kiev Town
Stole a young maiden most fair.

Days Kudeár with his mistress spent,
Nights on the road with his horde;
Suddenly, conscience awoke in him,
Stirred by the grace of the Lord.

Sleep left his couch. Of iniquity
Sickened his spirit at last;
Shades of his victims appeared to him,
Crowding in multitudes vast.

Long was this monster most obdurate,
  Blind to the light from above,
Then flogged to death his chief satellite,
  Cut off the head of his love,—

Scattered his gang in his penitence,
  And to the churches of God
All his great riches distributed,
  Buried his knife in the sod,

Journeyed on foot to the Sepulchre,
  Filled with repentance and grief;
Wandered and prayed, but the pilgrimage
  Brought to his soul no relief.

When he returned to his Fatherland
  Clad like a monk, old and bent,
'Neath a great oak, as an anchorite,
  Life in the forest he spent.

There, from the Maker Omnipotent,
  Grace day and night did he crave:
"Lord, though my body thou castigate,
  Grant that my soul I may save!"

Pity had God on the penitent,
  Showed him the pathway to take,
Sent His own messenger unto him
  During his prayers, who thus spake:

"Know, for this oak sprang thy preference,
  Not without promptings divine;
Lo! take the knife thou hast slaughtered with,
  Fell it, and grace shall be thine.

" Yea, though the task prove laborious,
Great shall the recompense be,
Let but the tree fall, and verily
Thou from thy load shalt be free."

Vast was the giant's circumference;
Praying, his task he begins,
Works with the tool of atrociousness,
Offers amends for his sins.

Glory he sang to the Trinity,
Scraped the hard wood with his blade.
Years passed away. Though he tarried not,
Slow was the progress he made.

'Gainst such a mighty antagonist
How could he hope to prevail?
Only a Samson could vanquish it,
Not an old man, spent and frail.

Doubt, as he worked, began plaguing him:
Once of a voice came the sound,
" Heh, old man, say what thy purpose is? "
Crossing himself he looked round.

There, Pan [1] Glukhóvsky was watching him
On his brave Arab astride,
Rich was the Pan, of high family,
Known in the whole countryside.

Many cruel deeds were ascribed to him,
Filled were his subjects with hate,
So the old hermit to caution him
Told him his own sorry fate.

[1] Polish title for nobleman or gentleman.

" Ho ! " laughed Glukhóvsky, derisively,
" Hope of salvation's not mine ;
These are the things that I estimate—
Women, gold, honour, and wine.

" My life, old man, is the only one ;
Many the serfs that I keep ;
What though I waste, hang, and torture them—
You should but see how I sleep ! "

Lo ! to the hermit, by miracle,
Wrath a great strength did impart,
Straight on Glukhóvsky he flung himself,
Buried the knife in his heart.

Scarce had the Pan, in his agony,
Sunk to the blood-sodden ground,
Crashed the great tree, and lay subjugate,
Trembled the earth at the sound.

Lo ! and the sins of the anchorite
Passed from his soul like a breath.
" Let us pray God to incline to us,
Slaves in the shadow of Death. . . ."

CHAPTER III

OLD AND NEW

Ióna has finished.
He crosses himself,
And the people are silent.
And then of a sudden

The trader cries loudly
In great irritation,
" What's wrong with the ferry ?
A plague on the sluggards !
Ho, ferry ahoy ! "

" You won't get the ferry
Till sunrise, for even
In daytime they're frightened
To cross : the boat's rotten !
About Kudeár, now—"

" Ho, ferry ahoy ! "

He strides to his waggon.
A cow is there tethered ;
He churlishly kicks her.
His hens begin clucking;
He shouts at them, " Silence ! "
The calf, which is shifting
About in the cart,
Gets a crack on the forehead.
He strikes the roan mare
With the whip, and departing
He makes for the Volga.
The moon is now shining,
It casts on the roadway
A comical shadow,
Which trots by his side.

" Oho ! " says the Elder,
" He thought himself able
To fight, but discussion
Is not in his line. . . .
My brothers, how grievous
The sins of the nobles ! "

" And yet not as great
As the sin of the peasant,"
The carter cannot here
Refrain from remarking.

" A plaguey old croaker ! "
Says Klím, spitting crossly ;
" Whatever arises
The raven must fly
To his own little brood !
What is it, then, tell us,
The sin of the peasant ? "

The Sin of Gleb the Peasant

A'miral Widower sailed on the sea,
Steering his vessels a-sailing went he.
Once with the Turk a great battle he fought,
His was the victory, gallantly bought.
So to the hero as valour's reward
Eight thousand souls [1] did the Empress award.
A'miral Widower lived on his land
Rich and content, till his end was at hand.
As he lay dying this A'miral bold
Handed his Elder a casket of gold.
" See that thou cherish this casket," he said,
" Keep it and open it when I am dead.
There lies my will, and by it you will see
Eight thousand souls are from serfdom set free."
Dead, on the table, the A'miral lies,
A kinsman remote to the funeral hies.

[1] Serfs.

Buried ! Forgotten ! His relative soon
Calls Gleb, the Elder, with him to commune.
And, in a trice, by his cunning and skill,
Learns of the casket, and terms of the will.
Offers him riches and bliss unalloyed,
Gives him his freedom,—the will is destroyed !
Thus, by Gleb's longing for criminal gains,
Eight thousand souls were left rotting in chains,
Aye, and their sons and their grandsons as well,
Think, what a crowd were thrown back into Hell !
God forgives all. Yes, but Judas's crime
Ne'er will be pardoned till end of all time.
Peasant, most infamous sinner of all,
Endlessly grieve to atone for thy fall !

Wrathful, relentless,
The carter thus finished
The tale of the peasant
In thunder-like tones.
The others sigh deeply
And rise. They're exclaiming,
" So, that's what it is, then,
The sin of the peasant.
He's right. 'Tis indeed
A most terrible sin ! "

" The story speaks truly ;
Our grief shall be endless,
Ah, me ! " says the Elder.
(His faith in improvements
Has vanished again.)
And Klímka, who always
Is swayed in an instant
By joy or by sorrow,

Despondingly echoes,
"A terrible sin!"

The green by the Volga,
Now flooded with moonlight,
Has changed of a sudden:
The peasants no longer
Seem men independent
With self-assured movements,
They're "Earthworms" again—
Those "Earthworms" whose victuals
Are never sufficient,
Who always are threatened
With drought, blight, or famine,
Who yield to the trader
The fruits of extortion,
Their tears, shed in tar.
The miserly haggler
Not only ill-pays them,
But bullies as well:
"For what do I pay you?
The tar costs you nothing.
The sun brings it oozing
From out of your bodies
As though from a pine."

Again the poor peasants
Are sunk in the depths
Of the bottomless gulf!
Dejected and silent,
They lie on their stomachs
Absorbed in reflection.
But then they start singing;
And slowly the song,
Like a ponderous cloud-bank,

Rolls mournfully onwards.
They sing it so clearly
That quickly our seven
Have learnt it as well.

The Hungry One

The peasant stands
With haggard gaze,
He pants for breath,
He reels and sways ;

From famine food,
From bread of bark,
His form has swelled,
His face is dark.

Through endless grief
Suppressed and dumb
His eyes are glazed,
His soul is numb.

As though in sleep,
With footsteps slow,
He creeps to where
The rye doth grow.

Upon his field
He gazes long,
He stands and sings
A voiceless song :

" Grow ripe, grow ripe,
O Mother rye,
I fostered thee,
Thy lord am I.

" Yield me a loaf
Of monstrous girth,
A cake as vast
As Mother-Earth.

" I'll eat the whole—
No crumb I'll spare ;
With wife, with child,
I will not share."

" Eh, brothers, I'm hungry ! "
A voice exclaims feebly.
It's one of the peasants.
He fetches a loaf
From his bag, and devours it.

" They sing without voices,
And yet when you listen
Your hair begins rising,"
Another remarks.

It's true. Not with voices
They sing of the famine—
But something within them.
One, during the singing,
Has risen, to show them
The gait of the peasant
Exhausted by hunger,
And swayed by the wind.
Restrained are his movements
And slow. After singing
" The Hungry One," thirsting
They make for the bucket,
One after another
Like geese in a file.
They stagger and totter

As people half-famished,
A drink will restore them.
"Come, let us be joyful!"
The deacon is saying.
His youngest son, Grísha,
Approaches the peasants.
"Some vodka?" they ask him.

"No, thank you. I've had some.
But what's been the matter?
You look like drowned kittens."

"What should be the matter?"
(And making an effort
They bear themselves bravely.)
And Vlass, the old Elder,
Has placed his great palm
On the head of his godson.

"Is serfdom revived?
Will they drive you to barschin
Or pilfer your hayfields?"
Says Grísha in jest.

"The hay-fields? You're joking!"

"Well, what has gone wrong, then?
And why were you singing
'The Hungry One,' brothers?
To summon the famine?"

"Yes, what's all the pother?"
Here Klímka bursts out
Like a cannon exploding.
The others are scratching

Their necks, and reflecting :
" It's true ! What's amiss ? "
" Come, drink, little ' Earthworms,'
Come, drink and be merry !
All's well—as we'd have it,
Aye, just as we wished it.
Come, hold up your noddles !
But what about Gleb ? "

A lengthy discussion
Ensues ; and it's settled
That they're not to blame
For the deed of the traitor :
'Twas serfdom's the fault.
For just as the big snake
Gives birth to the small ones,
So serfdom gave birth
To the sins of the nobles,
To Jacob the Faithful's
And also to Gleb's.
For, see, without serfdom
Had been no Pomyéshchick
To drive his true servant
To death by the noose,
No terrible vengeance
Of slave upon master
By suicide fearful,
No treacherous Gleb.

'Twas Prov of all others
Who listened to Grísha
With deepest attention
And joy most apparent.
And when he had finished
He cried to the others
In accents of triumph,

Delightedly smiling,
" Now, brothers, mark *that* ! "
" So now, there's an end
Of ' The Hungry One,' peasants ! "
Cries Klímka, with glee.
The words about serfdom
Were quickly caught up
By the crowd, and went passing
From one to another :
" Yes, if there's no big snake
There cannot be small ones ! "
And Klímka is swearing
Again at the carter :
" You ignorant fool ! "
They're ready to grapple !
The deacon is sobbing
And kissing his Grísha :
" Just see what a headpiece
The Lord is creating !
No wonder he longs
For the college in Moscow ! "
Old Vlass, too, is patting
His shoulder and saying,
" May God send thee silver
And gold, and a healthy
And diligent wife ! "

" I wish not for silver
Or gold," replies Grísha.
" But one thing I wish :
I wish that my comrades,
Yes, all the poor peasants
In Russia so vast,
Could be happy and free ! "
Thus, earnestly speaking,

And blushing as shyly
As any young maiden,
He walks from their midst.

The dawn is approaching.
The peasants make ready
To cross by the ferry.
" Eh, Vlass," says the carter,
As, stooping, he raises
The span of his harness,
" Who's this on the ground ? "

The Elder approaches,
And Klímka behind him,
Our seven as well.
(They're always most anxious
To see what is passing.)

Some fellow is lying
Exhausted, dishevelled,
Asleep, with the beggars
Behind some big logs.
His clothing is new,
But it's hanging in ribbons.
A crimson silk scarf
On his neck he is wearing;
A watch and a waistcoat;
His blouse, too, is red.
Now Klímka is stooping
To look at the sleeper,
Shouts, " Beat him ! " and roughly
Stamps straight on his mouth.

The fellow springs up,
Rubs his eyes, dim with sleep,
And old Vlásuchka strikes him.

He squeals like a rat
'Neath the heel of your slipper,
And makes for the forest
On long, lanky legs.
Four peasants pursue him,
The others cry, " Beat him ! "
Until both the man
And the band of pursuers
Are lost in the forest.

" Who is he ? " our seven
Are asking the Elder,
" And why do they beat him ? "

" We don't know the reason,
But we have been told
By the people of Tískov
To punish this Shútov
Whenever we catch him,
And so we obey.
When people from Tískov
Pass by, they'll explain it.
What luck ? Did you catch him ? "
He asks of the others
Returned from the chase.

" We caught him, I warrant,
And gave him a lesson.
He's run to Demyánsky,
For there he'll be able
To cross by the ferry."

" Strange people, to beat him
Without any cause ! "

" And why ? If the commune
Has told us to do it
There must be some reason ! "
Shouts Klím at the seven.
" D'you think that the people
Of Tískov are fools ?
It isn't long since, mind,
That many were flogged there,
One man in each ten.
Ah, Shútov, you rendered
A dastardly service,
Your duties are evil,
You damnable wretch !
And who deserves beating
As richly as Shútov ?
Not we alone beat him :
From Tískov, you know,
Fourteen villages lie
On the banks of the Volga ;
I warrant through each
He's been driven with blows."

The seven are silent.
They're longing to get
At the root of the matter.
But even the Elder
Is now growing angry.

It's daylight. The women
Are bringing their husbands
Some breakfast, of rye-cakes
And—goose ! (For a peasant
Had driven some geese
Through the village to market,
And three were grown weary,

And had to be carried.)
"See here, will you sell them?
They'll die ere you get there."
And so, for a trifle,
The geese had been bought.

We've often been told
How the peasant loves drinking;
Not many there are, though,
Who know how he eats.
He's greedier far
For his food than for vodka,
So one man to-day
(A teetotaller mason)
Gets perfectly drunk
On his breakfast of goose!
A shout! "Who is coming?
Who's this?" Here's another
Excuse for rejoicing
And noise! There's a hay-cart
With hay, now approaching,
And high on its summit
A soldier is sitting.
He's known to the peasants
For twenty versts round.
And, cosy beside him,
Justínutchka sits
(His niece, and an orphan,
His prop in old age).
He now earns his living
By means of his peep-show,
Where, plainly discerned,
Are the Kremlin and Moscow,
While music plays too.
The instrument once

Had gone wrong, and the soldier,
No capital owning,
Bought three metal spoons,
Which he beat to make music;
But the words that he knew
Did not suit the new music,
And folk did not laugh.
The soldier was sly, though:
He made some new words up
That went with the music.

They hail him with rapture!
"Good-health to you, Grandad!
Jump down, drink some vodka,
And give us some music."

"It's true I got *up* here,
But how to get down?"

"You're going, I see,
To the town for your pension,
But look what has happened:
It's burnt to the ground."

"Burnt down? Yes, and rightly!
What then? Then I'll go
To St. Petersburg for it;
For all my old comrades
Are there with their pensions,
They'll show me the way."

"You'll go by the train, then?"

The old fellow whistles:
"Not long you've been serving
Us, orthodox Christians,
You, infidel railway!

And welcome you were
When you carried us cheaply
From Peters to Moscow.
(It cost but three roubles.)
But now you want seven,
So, go to the devil!

"Lady so insolent, lady so arrogant!
Hiss like a snake as you glide!
Fig for you! Fig for you! Fig for you! Fig for you!
Puff at the whole countryside!
Crushing and maiming your toll you extort,
Straight in the face of the peasant you snort,
Soon all the people of Russia you may
Cleaner than any big broom sweep away!"

"Come, give us some music,"
Says Vlass to the soldier,
"For here there are plenty
Of holiday people,
'Twill be to your profit.
You see to it, Klímka!"
(Though Vlass doesn't like him,
Whenever there's something
That calls for arranging
He leaves it to Klímka:
"You see to it, Klímka!"
And Klímka is pleased.)

And soon the old soldier
Is helped from the hay-cart:
He's weak on his legs,—tall,
And strikingly thin.
His uniform seems

To be hung from a pole;
There are medals upon it.

It cannot be said
That his face is attractive,
Especially when
It's distorted by *tic*:
His mouth opens wide
And his eyes burn like charcoal,—
A regular demon!

The music is started,
The people run back
From the banks of the Volga.
He sings to the music.

* * * * *

A spasm has seized him:
He leans on his niece,
And his left leg upraising
He twirls it around
In the air like a weight.
His right follows suit then,
And murmuring, "Curse it!"
He suddenly masters
And stands on them both.

"You see to it, Klímka!"
Of course he'll arrange it
In Petersburg fashion:
He stands them together,
The niece and the uncle;
Takes two wooden dishes
And gives them one each,
Then springs on a tree-trunk
To make an oration.

(The soldier can't help
Adding apt little words
To the speech of the peasant,
And striking his spoons.)

* * * * *

The soldier is stamping
His feet. One can hear
His dry bones knock together.
When Klímka has finished
The peasants come crowding,
Surrounding the soldier,
And some a kopéck give,
And others give half:
In no time a rouble
Is piled on the dishes.

EPILOGUE

GRÍSHA DOBROSKLONOW

A CHEERFUL SEASON—CHEERFUL SONGS

The feast was continued
  Till morning—a splendid,
A wonderful feast!
  Then the people dispersing
Went home, and our peasants
  Lay down 'neath the willow;
Ióna—meek pilgrim
  Of God—slept there too.
And Sáva and Grísha,
  The sons of the deacon,
Went home, with their parent
  Unsteady between them.
They sang; and their voices,
  Like bells on the Volga,
So loud and so tuneful,
  Came chiming together:

"Praise to the hero
Bringing the nation
Peace and salvation!

" That which will surely
Banish the night
He [1] has awarded—
Freedom and Light !

" Praise to the hero
Bringing the nation
Peace and salvation !

" Blessings from Heaven,
Grace from above,
Rained on the battle,
Conquered by Love.

" Little we ask Thee—
Grant us, O Lord,
Strength to be honest,
Fearing Thy word !

" Brotherly living,
Sharing in part,
That is the roadway
Straight to the heart.

" Turn from that teaching
Tender and wise—
Cowards and traitors
Soon will arise.

" People of Russia,
Banish the night !
You have been granted
That which is needful—
Freedom and Light !

[1] Alexander II., who gave emancipation to the peasants.

The deacon was poor
As the poorest of peasants :
A mean little cottage
Like two narrow cages,
The one with an oven
Which smoked, and the other
For use in the summer,—
Such was his abode.
No horse he possessed
And no cow. He had once had
A dog and a cat,
But they'd both of them left him.

His sons put him safely
To bed, snoring loudly ;
Then Sávushka opened
A book, while his brother
Went out, and away
To the fields and the forest.

A broad-shouldered youth
Was this Grísha ; his face, though,
Was terribly thin.
In the clerical college
The students got little
To eat. Sometimes Grísha
Would lie the whole night
Without sleep ; only longing
For morning and breakfast,—
The coarse piece of bread
And the glassful of sbeeten.[1]
The village was poor
And the food there was scanty,
But still, the two brothers

[1] A popular Russian drink composed of hot water and honey.

Grew certainly plumper
When home for the holidays—
Thanks to the peasants.

The boys would repay them
By all in their power,
By work, or by doing
Their little commissions
In town. Though the deacon
Was proud of his children,
He never had given
Much thought to their feeding.
Himself, the poor deacon,
Was endlessly hungry,
His principal thought
Was the manner of getting
The next piece of food.
He was rather light-minded
And vexed himself little;
But Dyómna, his wife,
Had been different entirely:
She worried and counted,
So God took her soon.
The whole of her life
She by salt [1] had been troubled:
If bread has run short
One can ask of the neighbours;
But salt, which means money,
Is hard to obtain.
The village with Dyómna
Had shared its bread freely;
And long, long ago
Would her two little children

[1] There was a very heavy tax laid upon salt at the time.

Have lain in the churchyard
If not for the peasants.

And Dyómna was ready
To work without ceasing
For all who had helped her;
But salt was her trouble,
Her thought, ever present.
She dreamt of it, sang of it,
Sleeping and waking,
While washing, while spinning,
At work in the fields,
While rocking her darling
Her favourite, Grísha.
And many years after
The death of his mother,
His heart would grow heavy
And sad, when the peasants
Remembered one song,
And would sing it together
As Dyómna had sung it;
They called it "The Salt Song."

The Salt Song

Now none but God
Can save my son:
He's dying fast,
My little one. . . .

I give him bread—
He looks at it,
He cries to me,
"Put salt on it."

I have no salt—
No tiny grain;
"Take flour," God whispers,
"Try again. . . ."

He tastes it once,
Once more he tries;
"That's not enough,
More salt!" he cries.

The flour again. . . .
My tears fall fast
Upon the bread,—
He eats at last!

The mother smiles
In pride and joy:
Her tears so salt
Have saved the boy.

* * * * *

Young Grísha remembered
This song; he would sing it
Quite low to himself
In the clerical college.
The college was cheerless,
And singing this song
He would yearn for his mother,
For home, for the peasants,
His friends and protectors.
And soon, with the love
Which he bore to his mother,
His love for the people
Grew wider and stronger. . . .
At fifteen years old
He was firmly decided

To spend his whole life
In promoting their welfare,
In striving to succour
The poor and afflicted.
The demon of malice
Too long over Russia
Has scattered its hate ;
The shadow of serfdom
Has hidden all paths
Save corruption and lying.
Another song now
Will arise throughout Russia ;
The angel of freedom
And mercy is flying
Unseen o'er our heads,
And is calling strong spirits
To follow the road
Which is honest and clean.

Oh, tread not the road
So shining and broad :
Along it there speed
With feverish tread
The multitudes led
By infamous greed.

There lives which are spent
With noble intent
Are mocked at in scorn ;
There souls lie in chains,
And bodies and brains
By passions are torn,

By animal thirst
For pleasures accurst
Which pass in a breath.

There hope is in vain,
For there is the reign
Of darkness and death.

* * * * *

In front of your eyes
Another road lies—
'Tis honest and clean.
Though steep it appears
And sorrow and tears
Upon it are seen :

It leads to the door
Of those who are poor,
Who hunger and thirst,
Who pant without air,
Who die in despair—
Oh, there be the first !

The song of the angel
Of Mercy not vainly
Was sung to our Grísha.
The years of his study
Being passed, he developed
In thought and in feeling ;
A passionate singer
Of Freedom became he,
Of all who are grieving,
Down-trodden, afflicted,
In Russia so vast.

The bright sun was shining,
The cool, fragrant morning
Was filled with the sweetness
Of newly-mown hay.

Young Grísha was thoughtful,
He followed the first road
He met—an old high-road,
An avenue, shaded
By tall curling birch trees.
The youth was now gloomy,
Now gay ; the effect
Of the feast was still with him ;
His thoughts were at work,
And in song he expressed them :

" I know that you suffer,
O Motherland dear,
The thought of it fills me with woe ;
And Fate has much sorrow
In store yet, I fear,
But you will not perish, I know.

" How long since your children
As playthings were used,
As slaves to base passions and lust ;
Were bartered like cattle,
Were vilely abused
By masters most cruel and unjust ?

" How long since young maidens
Were dragged to their shame,
Since whistle of whips filled the land,
Since ' Service ' possessed
A more terrible fame
Than death by the torturer's hand ?

" Enough ! It is finished,
This tale of the past ;
'Tis ended, the masters' long sway ;

The strength of the people
Is stirring at last,
To freedom 'twill point them the way.

" Your burden grows lighter,
O Motherland dear,
Your wounds less appalling to see.
Your fathers were slaves,
Smitten helpless by fear,
But, Mother, your children are free ! "

A small winding footpath
Now tempted young Grísha,
And guided his steps
To a very broad hayfield.
The peasants were cutting
The hay, and were singing
His favourite song.
Young Grísha was saddened
By thoughts of his mother,
And nearly in anger
He hurried away
From the field to the forest.
Bright echoes are darting
About in the forest ;
Like quails in the wheat
Little children are romping
(The elder ones work
In the hayfields already).
He stopped awhile, seeking
For horse-chestnuts with them.
The sun was now hot ;
To the river went Grísha
To bathe, and he had
A good view of the ruins

That three days before
Had been burnt. What a picture!
No house is left standing;
And only the prison
Is saved; just a few days
Ago it was whitewashed;
It stands like a little
White cow in the pastures.
The guards and officials
Have made it their refuge;
But all the poor peasants
Are strewn by the river
Like soldiers in camp.
Though they're mostly asleep now,
A few are astir,
And two under-officials
Are picking their way
To the tent for some vodka
'Mid tables and cupboards
And waggons and bundles.
A tailor approaches
The vodka tent also;
A shrivelled old fellow.
His irons and his scissors
He holds in his hands,
Like a leaf he is shaking.
The pope has arisen
From sleep, full of prayers.
He is combing his hair;
Like a girl he is holding
His long shining plait.
Down the Volga comes floating
Some wood-laden rafts,
And three ponderous barges
Are anchored beneath

The right bank of the river.
The barge-tower yesterday
Evening had dragged them
With songs to their places,
And there he is standing,
The poor harassed man!
He is looking quite gay though,
As if on a holiday,
Has a clean shirt on;
Some farthings are jingling
Aloud in his pocket.
Young Grísha observes him
For long from the river,
And, half to himself,
Half aloud, begins singing:

The Barge-Tower

With shoulders back and breast astrain,
And bathed in sweat which falls like rain,
Through midday heat with gasping song,
He drags the heavy barge along.
He falls and rises with a groan,
His song becomes a husky moan. . . .
But now the barge at anchor lies,
A giant's sleep has sealed his eyes;
And in the bath at break of day
He drives the clinging sweat away.
Then leisurely along the quay
He strolls refreshed, and roubles three
Are sewn into his girdle wide;
Some coppers jingle at his side.
He thinks awhile, and then he goes
Towards the tavern. There he throws

Some hard-earned farthings on the seat ;
He drinks, and revels in the treat,
The sense of perfect ease and rest.
Soon with the cross he signs his breast :
The journey home begins to-day.
And cheerfully he goes away ;
On presents spends a coin or so :
For wife some scarlet calico,
A scarf for sister, tinsel toys
For eager little girls and boys.
God guide him home—'tis many a mile—
And let him rest a little while. . . .

The barge-tower's fate
  Lead the thoughts of young Grísha
To dwell on the whole
  Of mysterious Russia—
  The fate of her people.
For long he was roving
About on the bank,
  Feeling hot and excited,
His brain overflowing
With new and new verses.

Russia

"The Tsar was in mood
To dabble in blood :
To wage a great war.
Shall we have gold enough ?
Shall we have strength enough ?
Questioned the Tsar.

"(Thou art so pitiful,
Poor, and so sorrowful,
Yet thou art powerful,
Thy wealth is plentiful,
Russia, my Mother!)

"By misery chastened,
By serfdom of old,
The heart of thy people,
O Tsar, is of gold.

"And strong were the nation,
Unyielding its might,
If standing for conscience,
For justice and right.

"But summon the country
To valueless strife,
And no man will hasten
To offer his life.

"So Russia lies sleeping
In obstinate rest;—
But should the spark kindle
That's hid in her breast—

"She'll rise without summons,
Go forth without call,
With sacrifice boundless,
Each giving his all!

"A host she will gather
Of strength unsurpassed,
With infinite courage
Will fight to the last.

"(Thou art so pitiful,
Poor, and so sorrowful,
Yet of great treasure full,
Mighty, all-powerful,
Russia, my Mother !) "

Young Grísha was pleased
With his song ; and he murmured,
" Its message is true ;
I will sing it to-morrow
Aloud to the peasants.
Their songs are so mournful,
It's well they should hear
Something joyful,—God help them !
For just as with running
The cheeks begin burning,
So acts a good song
On the spirit despairing,
Brings comfort and strength."
But first to his brother
He sang the new song,
And his brother said, " Splendid ! "

Then Grísha tried vainly
To sleep ; but half dreaming
New songs he composed.
They grew brighter and stronger. . . .

Our peasants would soon
Have been home from their travels
If they could have known
What was happening to Grísha :
With what exaltation
His bosom was burning ;
What beautiful strains

In his ears began chiming;
  How blissfully sang he
The wonderful anthem
  Which tells of the freedom
And peace of the people.

THE END

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